#16 November 2002

border

The Comics Magazine

$1.00

PARENTAL ADVISORY

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Interviews with:

Joe Quesada -all the questions no one else asks!
Jamie Rich - Oni king part two!
Steve Purcell with guest appearances from Sam & Max: Freelance Police.
Ross Richie - the silent partner on Dominion
Plus another 11 Oni mini-interviews including: Guy Davis, Jen Van Meter, Jay Stephens, Judd Winick, Phil Hester, J. Torres and more!

Articles on:

Wally Wood - in search of the legend
Monster Club - new from APComics
Hermann Huppen and Jeremiah
D'Israeli & Edginton's Scarlet Traces
Marc Sleen's Nero - cancelled

Columns:
Arnold T. Blumberg's Transatlantic Meditations
Chev's The Blank Page
Mike Kidson's Continental Milestones (Blake et Mortimer)
Plus the usual from Kevin Hill, Martin Shipp, Chris Spicer, Selina Lock

borderline
THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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Cover design by the phantasmagorically marvelous Jim Campbell, Jeremiah original cover art by Hermann Huppen! It's called creativity!

Next issue: Finally, Ann Nocenti (if Phil can get his arse into gear); the Doctor Russell interview; the return of Drawing Board and some other stuff.

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IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

You paid for this issue of Borderline, find out why right here!

WELCOME to tomorrow.
We're sorry, but unfortunately
tomorrow now costs $1.00.
We hope that you find
enough enjoyment and
value for money in your
$1.00 to call again.
Tomorrow has been brought
to you by the
Future of the Internet [Inc.],
as we know it. Click…

Actually, we're not sorry about it at all. This is a new world. Welcome to Virtual Direct Marketing.

I do not for a second believe that I am the Phil Seuling of the Internet - but it was Seuling's ideas that changed the face of the comicbook industry (whether for good or for bad will be judged by history) and it'll be by extension of his ideas that you will either continue to read **Borderline** or it will disappear, perhaps forever, into Comics Limbo.

This is a massive experiment and one that could be a massive miscalculation. If it turns out that way, can I just say that I've thoroughly enjoyed doing this magazine and getting to know many of you over the last year or so? And that **Borderline** may well continue on, in some form or another.

You're either reading this or you're not. You guys that are will know what those guys that aren't are missing. There are reasons for that, both practical and ethical.

We appreciate the hard work and commitment that goes into web pages and for little or no return, but we feel we offer considerably more and in all areas. At the risk of alienating others, we're a team made up of industry professionals, media professionals and experienced comics types. Most websites are either run by amateurs or by a sole talented professional with a team of enthusiastic amateurs. Members of our team have already worked, and will continue to work, in outside media. I'm not suggesting that any of the many contributors to websites haven't or won't, but you've only got to look at the level of editing used at some of the most professional of sites to spot the difference.

The professionals working on **Borderline** are people who have been paid to write or edit or design for a living - in many places outside of comics. Some of us have had real training. Some of us served our apprenticeships and suffered the torment of assholes masquerading as sub-editors. I like to think that when you download **Borderline** you're getting the Sunday papers complete with the supplements and the special offers. We don't bother repeating ourselves month in, month out. We don't stick to the same old formula. **Borderline** walks the edge - the cutting edge - and goes to places where your average listings mag or news website simply doesn't.

So why ask for $1.00? Why charge at all?

I said I wasn't going to apologise and I'm also not going to try toS justify it to you. Suffice it to say that when the new pay version of **Borderline** goes on sale in places like Brazil it will be at a price those countries' populations *can afford*. I would have loved to stay free, but to do that I would have needed to persuade enough comics publishers to advertise. Some were more than willing, others not so forthcoming. However, one thing was sure, we couldn't make enough money from advertising to warrant continuing **Borderline** in its present form. So, after the current commissioned adverts expire we won't be soliciting **Borderline** as a place to advertise. We don't want the support from the industry unless it *really* wants to give it. If someone wants to advertise with us, we won't be taking adverts inside the magazine - they can hire space on the website, but not inside. If we're charging *you* to come in, then you shouldn't be subjected to advertisements.

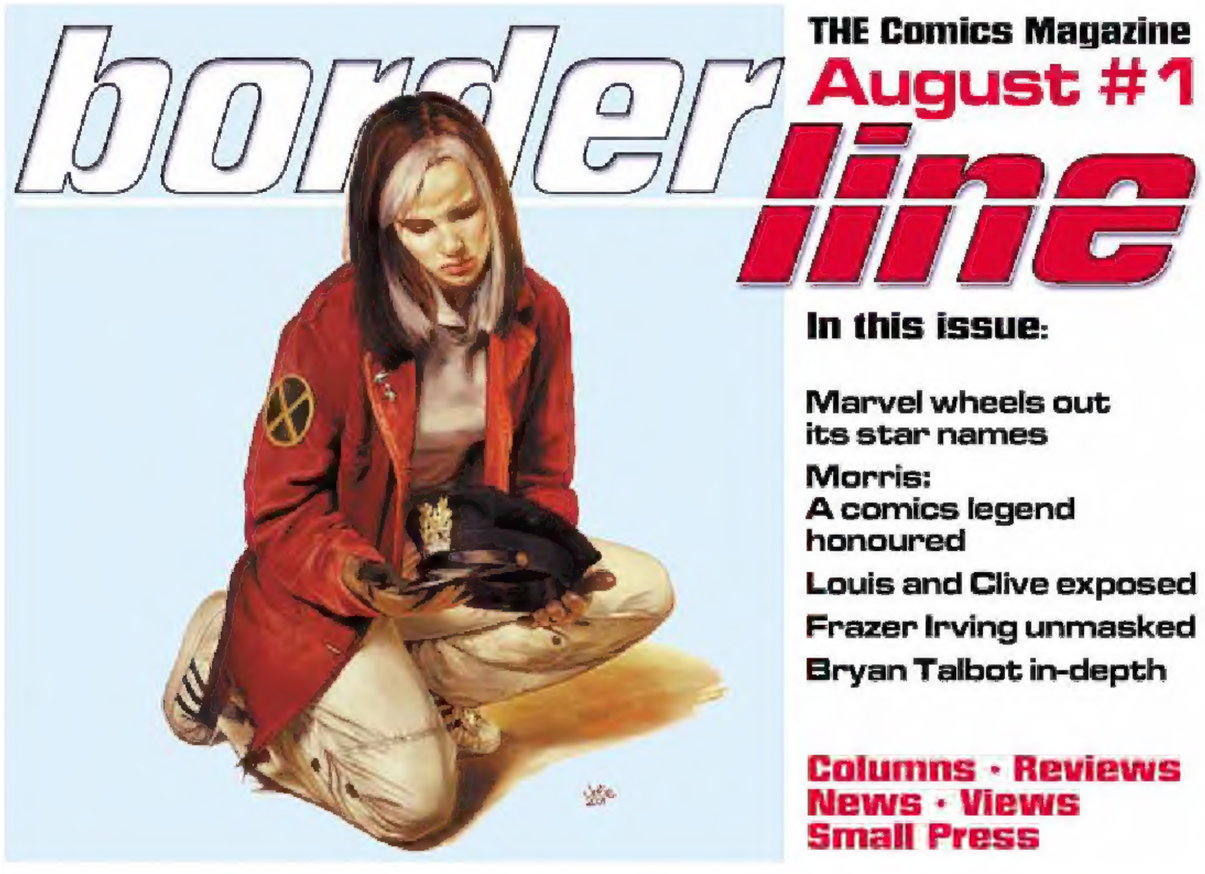
You're also getting a redesigned package with new editorial focus, new features, new columns, revamped this, that and the other. We're busting a gut for you people. We're dedicated enough to ensure that we care about what you're reading and we're doing something that I, personally, have been banging on about all year - we're being innovative. Thanks for witnessing it.

And that's about it. Except to tell you that we have a lot of new things planned and one of them is a project that we're very excited about at Borderline Heights. Whether this magazine survives is immaterial to the future of this new project. But I'm going to stop and be a tease. There'll be more info next month.

So… If you've given, you are reading this.

If there are enough of you reading this we'll see you next month.

I hope we do.



Any excuse to show something that's never seen before! This is the alternative "after the horse has bolted" cover to issue #1. Regular readers will know that issue #1 had a really shite cover, designed by myself, as opposed to the rather spiffing covers that Jocular Jim Campbell designs for us. Also, if you've paid for this you ought to see some of our not too evil secrets!

MARVEL MAN

THE JOE QUESADA INTERVIEW

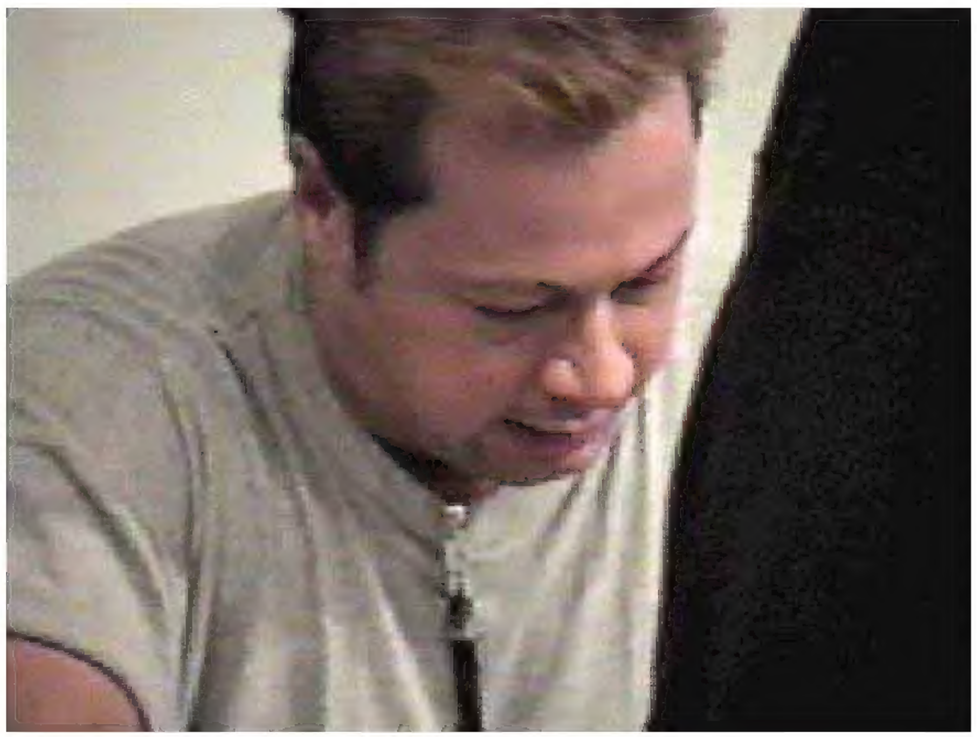
NATIVE New Yorker Joe Quesada is the most important man in US comics today. Probably. His position as Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics places him firmly in the spotlight and heaps Herculean weights upon his shoulders.

Joe started out at Valiant Comics in 1991 working as a colourist. He later moved on to DC Comics where he pencilled The Ray, written by Jack C Harris, then Azrael, the "replacement Batman" he co-created with Denny O'Neil. 1994 saw the creation of Event Comics with Jimmy Palmiotti and Laurie Bradach. Ash, Painkiller Jane and 22 Brides were among the titles that came from their stable.

In 1998 Joe and Jimmy created the Marvel Knights imprint. This bold venture gave the kiss of life to some of Marvel's best loved but failing characters. The imprint now has Captain America under its banner, which covers The Black Panther, Inhumans, Black Widow and The Punisher. And let's not forget Joe's incredible run on Daredevil with Kevin Smith, the man who included Joe in two of his films, Chasing Amy *and* Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back.

That takes us up to September 2000, when Joe became the new Editor-in-Chief at Marvel. The company was slapped into shape and flocks of readers who had walked away came running back. Now sales are increasing, both new and old creators are back inside the House of Ideas; and Joe even has his own website up and running (www.joequesada.com). It seems that people are either loving or hating New Marvel - and that's a lot better than people ignoring it.

Borderline's Dan Black caught up with the biggest man in American comics and asked him a few questions. These are the answers.



Borderline: Event Comics started in 1994? So we'll soon be approaching that marketable "one decade" anniversary. Will the Event Phoenix rise from the ashes?
Joe Quesada: Well, Event never died, it just became Marvel Knights. So in reality the company is stronger than ever!

BL: Many people I've spoken to expected to see the Event firefighter character Ash turn up after the tragic events of September 11 – surely he was a better tribute to the firefighters than some of the characters that were used?
JQ: Yeah, but I've been resisting bringing Ash into the Marvel Universe since long before 9-11 because it just seems too self-serving to me. It also sends the wrong message to creators. Oh, sure he can do that because he's the EIC... What do I do then when a creator wants their creator owned entity to live in the Marvel U?

BL: Whatever happened to Laurie Bradach?
JQ: She's in the catering and restaurant biz, owns her own business as a matter of fact. If you want to see some of her confectionery talents go to my website - *www.joequesada.com* - and go to the pics section. There's a cake she baked for Kevin Smith's birthday that will blow your mind! Her husband, Howard, is John Cleese's personal assistant, so they moved out to California. I see her at least two to three times a year. Great people, miss them terribly!

BL: Explain to me your relationship with DC Comics at the moment - personally and professionally.
JQ: Personally, I love those guys. I have some pretty decent pals and associations at AOL Comics (or so I'd like to believe). The new guy up there, Dan DiDio and I go back a ways and there's always folks like Mike Carlin and Mark Chiarello and Karen Berger who I really dig and have known for years. There's a whole group of editors

that I see at local watering holes, guys like Dan Raspler, Eddie Berganza and so many more, they're all good people and decent editors who have their hands tied behind their backs.

Professionally, I will always poke and dig at those guys, they're the competition and it's a Marvel tradition! However, there are a few people over there that do infuriate me, but more as a member of the comics creative community than as EIC. I've explained this before and I'll try again. You see, as a part of the Time Warner/AOL family they have the ability to bring our industry into the mainstream with a flick of a button. Heck, they have more power in their speed dials than any of us. Yet they are content with watching this industry remain a niche because it saves jobs up in that office. The needs of the few outweighing the needs of the many. God forbid that Time Warner/AOL start looking at them as a possible profit center! That would mean that they would have to produce and operate as a business! That would mean that that rich, comfy, overstaffed office would suffer some major overhauling. We can't have that so let's keep ourselves under the radar and the industry under the radar along with us!

BL: There was an air of disbelief that Jimmy Palmiotti didn't get a right-hand-man job at Marvel - why was that? Did he want one or was it out of your jurisdiction?
JQ: Jimmy left Marvel Knights because he needed to get some personal things together, so the timing would have been off anyway. A right-hand-man job to the EIC would be a managing editor gig, basically scheduling and making sure the trains run on time. That's not the kind of job that Jimmy would want. It's not like the Mafia where I would need my consiglieri. In a corporate structure I just couldn't see how that would have worked. Plus I don't think it's anything that would have interested him in the first place. Realistically, the closest right-hand-man job he could have had would have been as the sole editor of MK, but he already expressed disinterest in that.

BL: So, do you send him obscene emails when he goes off and works for the Distinguished Competition?
JQ: No, not at all. Jimmy is a freelancer and it's great that he works for everybody.

BL: Online chat/comment comics forums can raise some fierce criticism. How much time do you spend reading them and do you get frustrated?
JQ: I used to spend more time, but hardly any anymore. You see, I came to realize that it was just people typing and that the things that received the most violent reactions were the things that did the best for us. So very quickly I learned how to use these boards to my advantage by getting people talking about stuff. Also, there is this silent *majority* that really decides what happens in comics. Many people make the mistake of believing that the folks on the boards are the majority, when they're not. There is this whole other world. For example, there are retailers who make a significant amount of revenue for us publishers who don't

A rare Ash illustration to the left and above the revamped Bloodstone complete with arse cleavage!

have time to spend on the net, because they're too busy running the business. Then you have this whole contingent of retailers who spend all their time complaining (and typing) instead of running their shops. It's no wonder they're complaining.

BL: You've gone from being a creative force to a businessman. Is that a fair comment? Do you find these two personae clashing?
JQ: I've always been both. I ran my artistic career like a business, as all artists and writers should (that's how you keep from getting screwed), I ran Event Comics with Jimmy and the same with MK, so I've always had both sides.

BL: What is Marvel's current financial state? Is your job secure? Has Marvel actually made anything substantial out of the X-Men *and* Spider-Man *movies, and will they get anything substantial from* X2 *(the second X-Men film) or the impending* Hulk *movie? And if they do, will that go towards helping the financial situation any?*
JQ: As an officer of a public company I really can't get into the nuts and bolts of figures like that. All I can say is that we are healthy and on our feet. As for my job, well, my bosses treat me well and I'm dedicated to doing the best job I can for them. That's really all any employee can say about their job really. I believe a sense of over-confidence is always the easiest way to find yourself not doing what you're doing. What I can say is that I love my job and I love working for Marvel and I love being in the comics industry. If someday I'm asked to leave or someday I leave of my own accord, I hope that I can get back behind the drawing board and still make a go of it. However, I've always said that I hope when the time comes I have the wherewithal to know when it's time to hang it up before I get shown the door.

BL: Do you think you exploit the people who basically promote Marvel Comics for nothing? I ask this because the company has a limited advertising budget, is stingey as far as complimentary copies are concerned, and there appears to be a reluctance in certain areas of service to the comics press.
JQ: I love the way that question is phrased. Gee, Mr. Quesada, when did you stop beating your wife? At Marvel you're talking about a company that was bankrupt not too long ago. I doubt that you can find a riches to rags to riches story quite as compelling as the Marvel story. Many of the reasons for the upswing came down to a tightening of the belt. What's important about this is that my superiors have been very fair about this. No one has received preferential treatment. We don't survive on big frills and big expense accounts at Marvel and that goes from the top to the bottom of the food chain. So with respect to complimentary copies and stuff like that, we provide as much as we're allowed to. As for reluctance towards the press, there are only two reasons for this. One, we may have overlooked someone, or two, we don't provide info to people who have treated us unfairly.

BL: What about the current state of comics magazines - what are your thoughts on Wizard, TCJ, CBG, CI *and obviously* Borderline*? Do any of us do what you would hope we do, or do you see the future of comics magazines as something Internet-driven?*
JQ: You guys do exactly what you're supposed to do, which is promote the medium - and for that I'm thankful for each and every industry magazine.

BL: I've noticed your name on a few high profile covers recently - has it made you want to get back on a monthly book?
JQ: I always want to get back to regular drawing but can never find the time any more.

BL: Who are you aiming Marvel Comics at? We know who the Max line and the Ultimate line are for - what is the target demographic for the "old school" books?
JQ: I want them to be for everybody! I want to continue with our dominance and I want to try to get as much mainstream attention for the industry (not just Marvel) as I can! That is the one thing that this position offers me that I always planned to take full advantage of. This job comes with a spotlight, it's really a matter of whether the person in the chair wants to stand in it.

BL: What more can you personally do for Marvel Comics? Do you have many more plans and surprises?
JQ: Always do and never leak them.

BL: What have been your biggest mistakes since you took over at Marvel – and, of course, what do you regard as your biggest success stories?
JQ: I guess the biggest mistake would have been as a neophyte employee in a managing role. I had never managed that large a group of people but right from the beginning I knew the type of people I needed and the books that I wanted to produce. But this is a weird business, you know, you get attached to people and projects personally. This made it really hard for me to make the moves I wanted to early on, because some of it involved people losing jobs or being shifted around. So there were growing pains in that department - I eventually got it done but it was tough. You have any idea how hard it is to fire someone who has been at the company for 13 or so years? The truth of the matter is that as you're doing it you know that you're doing the person a favor, because ultimately they've been at the job too long and they're lacking results and there's really no future for them at Marvel anyway. If I had been a bit more seasoned at the management level I would have pulled the bandage on a lot of this early on. I know it sounds terrible but it's the merciful thing to do. You saw the types of books that Marvel was producing that were crap, and there were a lot of people on staff who thought that there was nothing wrong, they couldn't smell smoke. There was also this feeling of entitlement at Marvel with certain folk, which really rubbed me the wrong way. When I got the job I had an editor come into my office and say, "You may be my boss but I don't think you deserve this job. What the hell have you ever

Above left, Lady Death by JQ. Above: Joe signing, and in the background is John Cassaday

??? Please sign my arse! Joe's Daredevil and signature on a not-so-fat bottom!

accomplished anyway?" I had to point out to this person that before being at Marvel I had owned my own business and had over nine years experience in the biz. But to this guy, if you hadn't been at Marvel for those years, what can you possibly know?

As for success stories, just take a look at the last two years. Thanks to Bill I think we've done a pretty decent job!

BL: What is Bill Jemas really like?
JQ: Bill is one of the greatest people on the planet to work for. He's amazingly creative and very impulsive. You need to be on your toes all the time because we can start some of the biggest marketing campaigns for the year at a moment's notice. He lets me do my stuff, he's loyal to his people and really I can't ask for more. He's also become one of my best friends over the last two years.

BL: The release of Spider-Man *caused a lot of excitement. But do you feel that recent X- and Spidey films benefit comics sales in the long term, or just cause a brief rise?*
JQ: So far it looks like a long term effect. As long as the books are good, the effect will be there!

BL: The "U-Decide" event is here now, and you're going to get criticized whatever the outcome - do you regret putting your name to it?
JQ: Are you nuts, I created it! It will be a blast no matter what!

BL: You've made yourself a name for attracting some top-notch creative talent. Who won't *you be asking into the House of Ideas?*
JQ: Ah, I don't really want to get into that. As I've said before there is no one that is blacklisted here at Marvel, on my end. The company does have a person that they've told me can no longer work here but that has nothing to do with me. However, as for me, there are three people that would have to publicly apologize before they could ever work here again. Let's just leave it at that.

BL: Are there any creators you'd love to get working there that are maybe not associated with the big M?
JQ: Well, there's still Alan Moore...

BL: There's a constant argument between me and other Borderliners over the price of comics. What is your view on that?
JQ: It's unfortunately a naturally occurring evil worldwide with respect to any product - prices go up. What we've managed to do at Marvel is nothing short of remarkable. We've managed to keep holding the $2.25 mark on most of the mainline and Ultimate titles, while improving the quality of paper and coloring. And now that we have this TPB thing figured out (we had problems figuring out pricing in the beginning), our TPBs are actually less expensive than those of our nearest competitors. Also, I don't know if you've noticed, but not only has DC gone to a crappy paper stock on their monthly comics while raising prices, but they're doing it to their TPBs as well. Boy, I remember the day when we creators use to look forward to having our TPB come out from DC because it meant the 5 star treatment. Great production, great paper and now look at what's happening over there! I just like to point these things out because they've been very quiet about these changes. Even Vertigo has quietly, without fanfare, raised their cover prices to $2.75 and $2.99. Has anyone noticed?

BL: Do you remember Spelljammer Comics? And where did you get your style from?
JQ: Of course I do! I was a huge Mignola fan, a real clone. But it was about a year later that I started to find my own thing, so to speak.

BL: Did you know that Jack C. Harris also wrote pet manuals?
JQ: Nah - that's cool!

BL: What did you think of Bristol (the home of this year's UK Comics Festival)? And will you come back?
JQ: I had a great time. The fans were wonderful and it was good for our business. I don't know if I'll personally make it next year but I will try to budget to send some more editors over!

BL: Okay - tell me your favourite film, album and TV show at the moment.
JQ: Favorite film would still have to be *Blade Runner*. Album would have to be *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. TV show is a toss up between *C.S.I* and *Survivor*.

BL: What does Joe Quesada do to relax when he isn't working?
JQ: I've actually gotten back to writing music and I'm going to be playing live with my old band again.

It's just for fun - and a lot of fun!

BL: Do you have any pets?
JQ: Three cats.

BL: If you were offered your choice of ownership of any character - who would it be and why?
JQ: Batman! God, what I could do with that character!

BL: The world is reading, what do you want to tell it?
JQ: Just be good to one another.

...Like a big pizza pie, that's Our Joey!
Quesada, Marvel's e-i-c is allegedly a big fan of the old Italian favourite!

THE BLANK PAGE

Andrew 'Chev' Cheverton is in the picture – or is he?

In The Flat Field

I GET bored. It's a rare disorder these days. I seem to have a long attention span. It means I have to watch about seven hours of MTV before I get any sense from it. I perversely enjoy the fact that *Farscape* requires me to pay a bit of attention and actually remember to tune in every week. I relish the biggest, fattest science fiction or fantasy novels, and don't suffer from apoplexy if they come in trilogies. As long as my input and dedication are rewarded at the end, I do not begrudge any of my time or effort invested in the experience. Which brings us to comics.

A friend of mine reads about four comics at the moment, because he thinks that the rest of them are shit. One that he reads is Daredevil, currently thought of by those in the know as being "not shit". As he chooses not to read any of the industry magazines, he relies upon my spurious expertise to answer such germane questions as "Is the current storyline in Daredevil going to actually end anytime soon?" and "Is there any danger of anything at all interesting happening in Ultimate Spider-Man?"

And my answer is always the same: "For this we're going to have to go all the way back to 1963, when Stan Lee thought it would be a great idea to write stories that didn't actually go anywhere whilst simultaneously looking as if absolutely shedloads of stuff was happening."

And my friend will say, as he always does, "Screw that. This is the space year 2002. Why aren't comics as cool as fuck yet? How come a Death In Vegas single will make me want to dance and rut and write mad love poetry all within four minutes, but a Marvel comic will piss ten minutes of my life up the wall for the same amount of money yet leave me wondering what it was all about and why am I bothering?"

And my answer is always the same: "Ah Christ, man. How the hell should I know?"

Writing is rhythmic and organic, working to its own cadence and internal structures. If you read any of Warren Ellis's forums or online writings you will learn some of them, because Ellis is doing things with his comics that many people miss, which is fine because they're not there to be noticed, but to aid the story.

A superhero comic, however, is a medium that enforces a structure upon itself: twenty-four pages a month, irrespective of how the story is flowing or how much space the thing needs to breathe. Then those twenty-four pages are split again when the adverts are shoved into the comic. You can tell a lot about how your reading of a comic is affected by ad pages by going back through the issue and seeing where they were placed, and how that alters the pacing and the tone of the story.

So, you've worked your way through the story, you've hurdled the intrusive advertisements for video games and dubious foodstuffs, and you've diligently bought every issue, every month and you've read them all. What do you have there to show for all that?

Not much. Daredevil and Elektra both finished storylines recently and yet neither of them brought anything to a conclusion. They just sort of stopped. "The End", except apparently not. The Incredible Hulk is quite possibly Marvel's best-written title at the moment, but literally nothing happens. Ultimate Spider-Man begs comparison with comics of forty years ago and comes away looking plodding and ham-fisted. Things happen, incidents occur, but they all lack a defining resolution, that emotional pay-off that backtracks through the story and finishes the package. All you get is a hook for the next issue – "Come back again, if you want some sort of ending, although we can't promise you'll get it".

I'm fully aware that Marvel Comics are potboilers. But most of their current crop is barely simmering and I'm finding it difficult to maintain enthusiasm for being prick-teased by a bloody comicbook.

Sadly, it works backwards too. I recently had a massive clear out of comics that I knew I would never read again. While doing this I found a great many series that I had started but had stopped buying when the story lost my interest. One of the most irritating things was that I couldn't separate early issues I had enjoyed from later ones that I hadn't; the stories just merged from one into the other. By cancelling the comic I had curtailed an ongoing saga that, literally, would never end. In this way, I had a collection of comics that wouldn't actually benefit from re-reading, because the stories within had no climax, no emotional finale such as you'd find in books and movies.

And what is the point of a story that never ends?

THE JAMIE RICH INTERVIEW 2

LAST issue, in the first part of this frankly enormous interview, Oni Press editor-in-chief Jamie Rich told Borderline's Andrew Cheverton about all manner of things. Still reeling from that, Cheverton picks up again with Rich to discuss, via e-mail, the future, cream soda and Audrey Hepburn...

RICH BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS

Borderline: Beyond being an editor and a publisher, you also write; most famously the novel Cut My Hair and a Buffy the Vampire Slayer serial featuring Spike in the latest Dark Horse Extra, with some lovely Chynna Clugston-Major art. What are your ambitions in that area?

Jamie S. Rich: Not very focused, unfortunately. I have a few pitches around the biz, and have one I need to finish up, but right now I don't have much of a track record in comics, and I don't want to rely on my editorial name. I want to be judged as a writer, nothing more. So, currently, I just follow a good idea if I have it and see if anyone is interested. I don't plan to let Oni publish anything, as I think that is just too much vanity. Cut My Hair has moved over here, but I did that somewhere else first, and Joe Nozemack was kind enough to suggest Oni put it back in print. Thankfully, it did well for us and I

don't have to lose the company money. So, yay Joe!

I think, as a writer, I am much more prose-oriented, and I'm midway through the laborious second novel, The Everlasting. I say "laborious" in terms of the process... so far, those I've shown bits to find it to be a more confident read than Cut My Hair. Right now, Christine Norrie and Matty Ryan at *www.spookoo.com* are designing my website, *www.confessions123.com (er, that looks to me very much like a Paul Weller fan site - Production Ed.).* It will give people access to a news place for what I am doing as a writer. Also, there should be a pictures/prose collaboration between myself and Christine called *Romantica* up at spookoo.com soon.

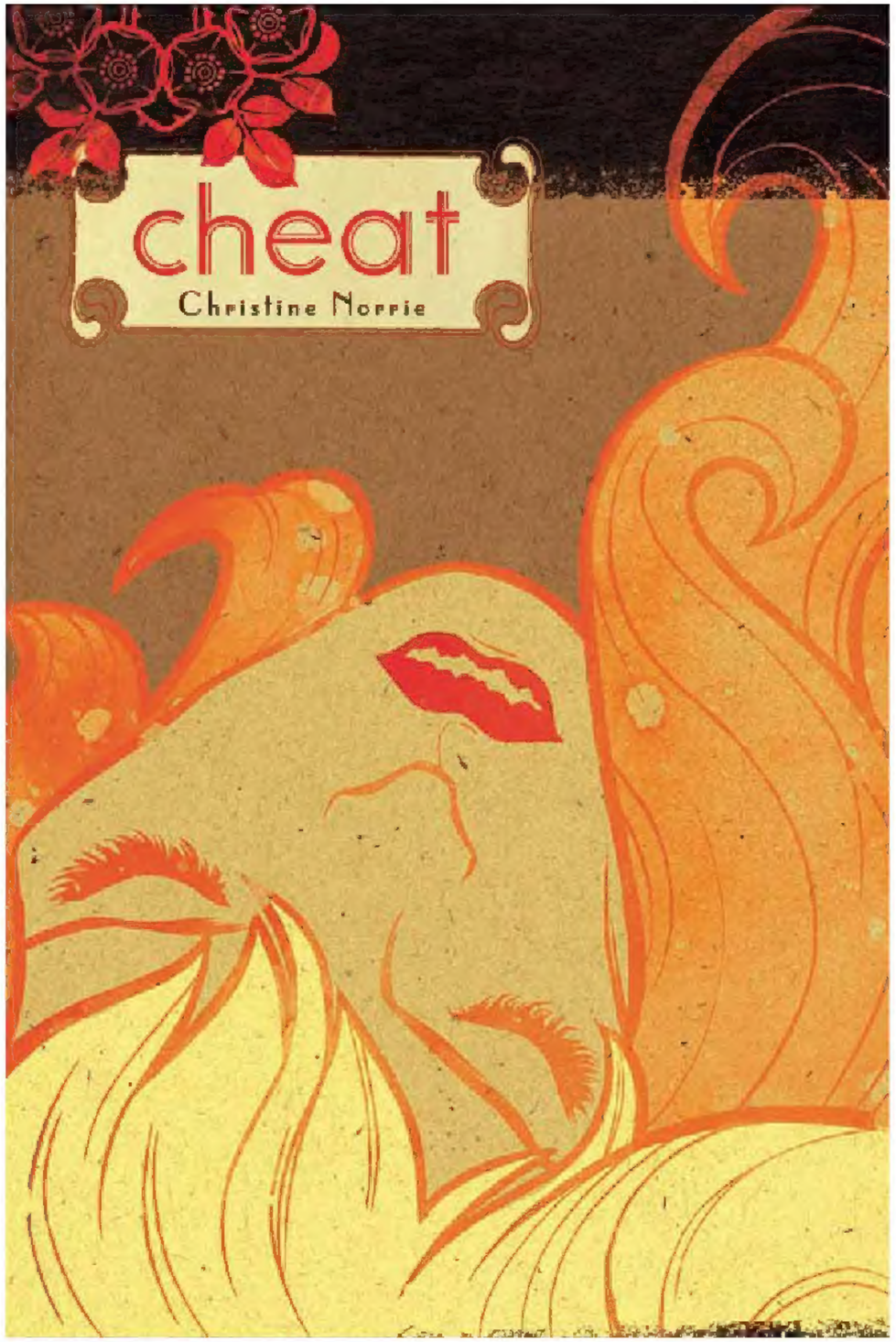
BL: The Internet seems to be a great resource for publishing and promotion, for getting the first contact with possible customers. Oni was quick to utilise the 'net with free downloadable sample issues and promotions. Was that a consciously aggressive move for a new, modern company?
JSR: Well, a lot of our decisions seemed logical just based on what avenues of promotion are available to us as a small comics publisher. There are still some decent venues for print journalism in this medium, but they are also limited in who they reach. Your random person isn't likely to stumble on a *CBG* or a *Comics Journal*. Those mags are useful for reaching who they reach, but we also realized that we needed to get to more.

Online news sites are, of course, a dime a dozen, but we found success with the more entrenched ones, like Newsarama, Comics Continuum, Comic Book Resources, NinthArt, Popimage, etc. We also saw the opportunity to talk to people direct through places like the Warren Ellis Forum, Bendis' Jinxworld board, etc., and we saw opportunity there. We saw a way to fulfil our needs, which was somehow putting material in front of people who might not see it otherwise. And basically, by using a medium where all people had to do was click their mouse and see it instantly, it all made sense. I think I started the Sunday Comics, whereas Joe was the genius behind the downloadable PDFs. And a lot of credit goes to James Lucas Jones, who puts the previews together and keeps our site going.

BL: With monthly comics only in specialist shops, trade collections being sold in bookshops and the Internet increasingly used to publish as well as publicise work, what do you see as the future for comics?
JSR: Well, hopefully we'll finally see an expansion. Maybe we can finally break out of the self-imposed ghetto and change how we are viewed as pop culture. I don't think that the Internet will allow more people access to creating the work, but maybe it will change how they get their work seen (though, it should be said that comics is one of the easiest artforms in which to self-publish, get your book printed, etc., already). I think stuff like Ghost World and Road to Perdition have been healthy steps to get past the "Biff, Bang, Pow, comics aren't just for kids!" level of mainstream journalism.

I just think, at my most optimistic, that comics will just continue to grow. For the more complete-in-one-go work, we'll eventually move out of the serialized formats. Hopefully people will stop seeing getting a gig at Marvel and DC as validation for a creator who has already been publishing his creator-owned work for a long time. I just see everything getting better.

But that's only when I am being optimistic. Right now, I am not too optimistic. I don't like what is going on in the market. We are regressing in terms of material, be it nostalgia for '80s properties or the predominance of the capes and tights. Sure, some of these things may be getting some people back into shops, but are we hooking them in the right way? Are we getting them to buy the things that will keep them here for life, or are we just being greedy the way we all were in the early '90s, which got us into the mess we've been in to start off with?



BL: In a recent interview regarding Road To Perdition, *Tom Hanks seemed ignorant that comics were even being published these days, and Sam Mendes as much as said that he hoped to rise above the standard of a comic strip in the film. That sort of condescending ignorance from established personalities never helps to raise the profile of comics.*
JSR: Shit, really? That sucks. I have

to admit to never really "getting" Iggy Pop, but I never actively disliked the man until *Tank Girl*, and he was on MTV talking about how he didn't know the comic and why should he, because he can read. And it was like, "Fuck you, give the money back to Hewlett then. You cashed the check!" I mean, that guy's lyrical ability at times suggests he can't read all that well. (Yeah, be angry at me, punk rock fanboys, but go listen to songs like *Candy* and *Butt Town*, and then defend your man.)

But that said, there has been lots of other positive press. That may all be decimated by the huge wave of superhero movies coming. All it's going to take is one or two stinkers, and we could be back to square one. It's also a little disheartening that Max Allan Collins chose to do the sequels to Road to Perdition as prose, when it would have been a great time to maybe push comics. It's his property and he should follow his muse, but it's disheartening nonetheless, whatever his reasons were.

So, like all things comics... a little bittersweet: two steps forward, and who knows how many back.

BL: I've had many heated discussions with people, comic fans and not, about Spider-Man. *Most people seem to love it, and non-comics fans assume I must be over the moon about it. But I thought the script was* terrible: *over-ambitious, mugging for inappropriate laughs and some awful dumbing-down of the material.*
JSR: I haven't seen *Spider-Man*, so I don't know. I was hot for it at first - with massive reservations, since big-budgets effects movies always bore me - but since I didn't get to see it right away, my interest waned greatly. Now it's likely to be a DVD rental or something.

BL: Well, you're not missing anything more than a big budget special effects movie. Is any Oni material up for adaptation, or is that an area in which you have no interest? Do you think it even helps the profile of the comics?
JSR: I am personally not interested in adaptations of our work, no, from an aesthetic point of view. I just don't understand the need to adapt comics, novels, rock operas... what have you. But, I am not against it as either a businessman or as someone who wants to support my artists' wishes, both creatively and financially. If they are good for it, then we are good for it. So far both of our Greg Rucka titles, Whiteout and Queen & Country, have been optioned; The Coffin has been optioned, and Jay Stephens is going into production on a Tutenstein cartoon (scheduled to premiere in June 2003). As far as upping the comics profile... it's hard to say. I'd say it can't hurt, but I think it did hurt Tank Girl. I know Ghost World and From Hell ended up everywhere, but how did they sell? Was there good sell-through? I hope so, but I honestly haven't heard.

BL: I think Ghost World *had the same demographic appeal as the comics anyway - it's the sort of film we'd watch even if it weren't comics-based. What sort of movies appeal to you?*
JSR: Well, *you* might watch *Ghost World*. I didn't like it all that much. I am actually a sucker for romantic comedies. I can actually take 'em pretty sappy. I love classic Audrey Hepburn films.

I am also a film noir fanatic. Love Orson Welles. Love Kurosawa. I tend to be a bit of an arty-farty sort of movie goer, but I can also go pretty lowbrow, too. You know, something like *Austin Powers in Goldmember* can be pretty entertaining. I like to be entertained without being insulted. I think a lot of the big budget films do that.

I spent the last couple of weeks devouring every second of the *Amelie* and *Royal Tenenbaums* DVDs.

BL: That explains the lovely Breakfast At Tiffany's *picture on your business card. But I have to ask, what's the bottle of Cream Soda and the musical dollar bill all about?*
JSR: Well, the drawing was always a bit odd, and initially it looked a little too much like I am in a strip club. I tend to drink cream soda, and not beer, so we did that to innocent it up a bit. I think the musical dollar is indicative of where my money goes. I dunno. Christine Norrie is a hell of an artist, but she's whacky!

BL: How was San Diego?
JSR: Nutso. Numbers I have heard estimate a rise from 55K to 80K since last year, as far as attendance goes. The line went on for blocks on Saturday and never seemed to recede, and rumour was that they ran out of badges mid-day. I ended up not seeing a lot of people. It's all just too gigantic and noisy and strange. I am exhausted still, five days later.

BL: Is the San Diego Con a victim of its own success, or was it just full of people who liked Spider-Man?
JSR: I don't think you could say that it was all Spidey fans, because everyone did brisk business and everyone made money. We always had people at our booth. Chynna Clugston-Major's superpower is actually to make a line appear instantly whenever she sits down. It's like they're waiting and hiding behind poles and garbage cans and pounce as soon as they see her.

Whatever it was, I'm not complaining. Actually, there was a guy there who I had met in Bristol *(site of the UK comic convention – Ed.)*, who had never been to any other con before, who just couldn't believe how massive it was. I suppose some of it was the *Spider-Man* film, maybe *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* fandom, and maybe what they say about escapist entertainment doing well in bad times.

BL: Do you approach San Diego differently to, say, Bristol or the EXPO festival in Maryland?
JSR: Yeah, I mean, the size alone demands that you bring more

product, you have way more people signing, a lot more coordinating to do. For both San Diego and Wizard World we had to adopt a policy of people signing up for portfolio reviews so that we could use the time we had for them effectively, whereas at Bristol, I pretty much sat and did them all day. They are almost like completely different animals. One is hunting for mice, the other elephants.

BL: Did you get anything from hunting mice at Bristol? That is, would you come back next year?
JSR: I would definitely come back, yeah. It was a really good time. There is a lot of talent percolating in your country. I didn't see any "undiscovered" person that was ready quite yet, but I saw a lot of talent in the rough, well worth watching.

BL: That's good to hear. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us, Jamie.
JSR: Rock! That's all I have left to say. Thanks, Andrew!

A selection of images from Oni Press on this and previous pages. The opening page image is from Jamie Rich's Business card...

ONI PRESS – THE CREATORS HAVE THEIR SAY PART 2

LAST month Borderline brought you "Jay Eales' interviews a host of Oni Press's top creators" part one.

This month, Borderline brings you "Jay Eales' interviews another *host of Oni Press's top creators!"*

He is nothing if not thorough...

NUNZIO DeFILIPPIS & CHRISTINA WEIR

How do you find working with the people at Oni?
The guys at Oni are by far the most professional and courteous of all the (few) people we've worked with. They are open to all sorts of story ideas, and the range of things they will publish is sometimes staggering. They manage to go against the mainstream trends without ever feeling like rebels without causes...

When we proposed Skinwalker, Jamie Rich came to us, trying to propose artists with darker styles, many of whom didn't have the clean lines and realism that we were looking for. We felt the realism was key to grounding the story. He felt something darker would help set the mood. It went back and forth for a while, and we were pretty set to have Brian Hurtt do the pencils (which was along the realism lines we had proposed), and Jamie, in a moment of brilliance, found a way for both of our instincts to be right. He proposed Arthur [Dela Cruz] inking and toning the book - bringing the perfect mood to complement the realism of Brian's work. It was a great example of Jamie knowing and respecting what we wanted, yet knowing he had a valid point and that the book would be better for it. It's a perfect illustration of how great an editor he is, and the book looks amazing because of that.

Any convention stories you can share with us?
Scurrilous rumors? Can't help you there. Much as we make frequent appearances in Portland, we ultimately aren't everyday fixtures in the Oni/Portland comics community that seems to flourish up there. Try some Portland locals, they may have Oni dirt to dish...

On professional rumor level, we'll be working with Oni again - this time we'll be working with James Lucas Jones, who we've gotten to know through Jamie and Greg Rucka - we're excited to work with James, and we have two new projects, one that's another crime-based drama. The other's a bit more eclectic (an Italian wedding), and therefore we're glad it's through Oni.

I presume that these other Oni projects you mentioned are still at too early a stage to tell us a bit more about them?
Not really. In fact we've just been given the go-ahead on both of them and artists are now attached. The first project (though we're not sure what order they'll be released in) is a five-issue mini series entitled Three Strikes. It's the story of a nineteen year old facing a ludicrous jail sentence for shoplifting under California's three strikes law. Feeling he has no other choice, he skips bail and hits the road. The story follows him and the bail enforcement agent sent after him, as the hunter becomes more sympathetic to the hunted and the hunted becomes a person less worthy of sympathy. Brian Hurtt, who did such great work on Skinwalker, is going to draw it. The second project is an original graphic novel entitled Maria's Wedding and is a complete departure from what we've done for Oni so far. It's the story of the first straight wedding in a big Italian family since a gay wedding tore the family apart. There's all this anger and resentment underneath the surface, and everyone either dreads or awaits the arrival of Maria's outspoken cousin, who may bring all the fights to the surface. This is much more of a comedy-drama with no skinned bodies or fugitives to be found. For the art, Oni introduced us to Jose Garibaldi, who has a great unique style that should highlight the quirkiness of the material.

Would you like to encapsulate Skinwalker for any of our readers who aren't familiar with it?
Skinwalker follows an ambitious FBI Agent and a cynical Navajo Tribal Policewoman who team up to track down a killer who is trying to corrupt the forbidden ritual of Skinwalking. Skinwalkers are Navajo witches who wear the skins of dead animals to become like the animal, and the killer wants to take it to the next level by wearing human skins.

Do you know if plans have been put in motion for a Skinwalker trade collection?
As far as we know, it is definitely going to happen. But we don't know yet when.

What has feedback on the series been like so far?
The reviews, at least the ones we've seen, have been terrific. The series seems to be flying under a lot of people's radar, but we're hoping the reviews and positive word of mouth will help when the trade comes out. With Oni's track record with trade paperbacks, it seems a lot of people prefer to wait for the trade.

Can you describe what a typical working day is like for the two of you? And how does your writing partnership work in practice?
Well, a working day isn't necessarily a typical day. We have a very on and off work ethic. When we write, we can lose entire days to the writing process and have to work hard to remind ourselves to eat and go out. But there are other days when we're not working at all, save for talking story ideas at random intervals. But when we have a project that we've talked into writing-ready status, it kind of works this way: we plot every last detail together, and try to keep a full synopsis for the project, scene by scene with some of the key dialogue already in place. Then we take that outline and turn it into a script. This process usually consists of Nunzio pacing and talking non-stop and Christina (forgive the weird third person thing) at the computer typing what she likes and ignoring the rest. Then we reread, and edit in much the same fashion.

PHIL HESTER

How did your relationship with Oni come about?
Like most things that happen in the world of comics, Bob Schreck was behind it. He hired Ande [Parks] and I to do a Clerks book when that property was still at Oni. Bob is good.

What's the best thing about working with Jamie, Joe and James?
Sometimes they'll come over and we'll stay up all night doing each other's hair. Actually, they have the best taste in all of comics publishing. Oni would be my favorite publisher even if I had never worked with them.

Any convention stories you can share with us?
No. Really, I'm probably the only teetotaller left in comics. All my tales of overindulgence have to do with spring rolls or ribs.

Have you done any other work for Oni apart from The Coffin, so far? (Aha! Found the latest Color Special and discover you did Clerks: The Lost Scene, The Operation and Deep Sleeper.)
You got it.

Is Deep Sleeper a one-off, or as with many of the strips in the Oni Color Specials, a precursor to a series? It feels like it could share the same universe as The Coffin.
It's a mini. It does feel like a sequel because Mike and I are dealing with similar themes, but it doesn't follow the same continuity or have the same characters.

Do you know yet if you'll be returning to work on The Operation series?
I think as soon as my schedule opens up.

For any of our readers unfamiliar with The Coffin, could you encapsulate what it's about?
It's a morality play about a scientist who doesn't really value his humanity until he loses it trying to conquer death through technology. How's that?

Any news to report on the optioning of The Coffin as a motion picture? Am I right in thinking that the option was taken out after only one or two issues had been published?
Yeah. That really surprised us. Nothing new to say, except that Guillermo Del Toro says he still wants to make it after *Hellboy*. To think, a few years ago I would been ecstatic about a *Hellboy* movie, now I just hope it wraps early.

You've got a sequel to The Coffin coming along, haven't you? Can you give us some information about that?
Not really. Mike and I are just kicking ideas around. It would feature Keen from the original series.

Did I read somewhere that there was a title for it already, though? Or is that what I get for believing the comics press?☺
That's funny. We've never spoken about it to anyone.

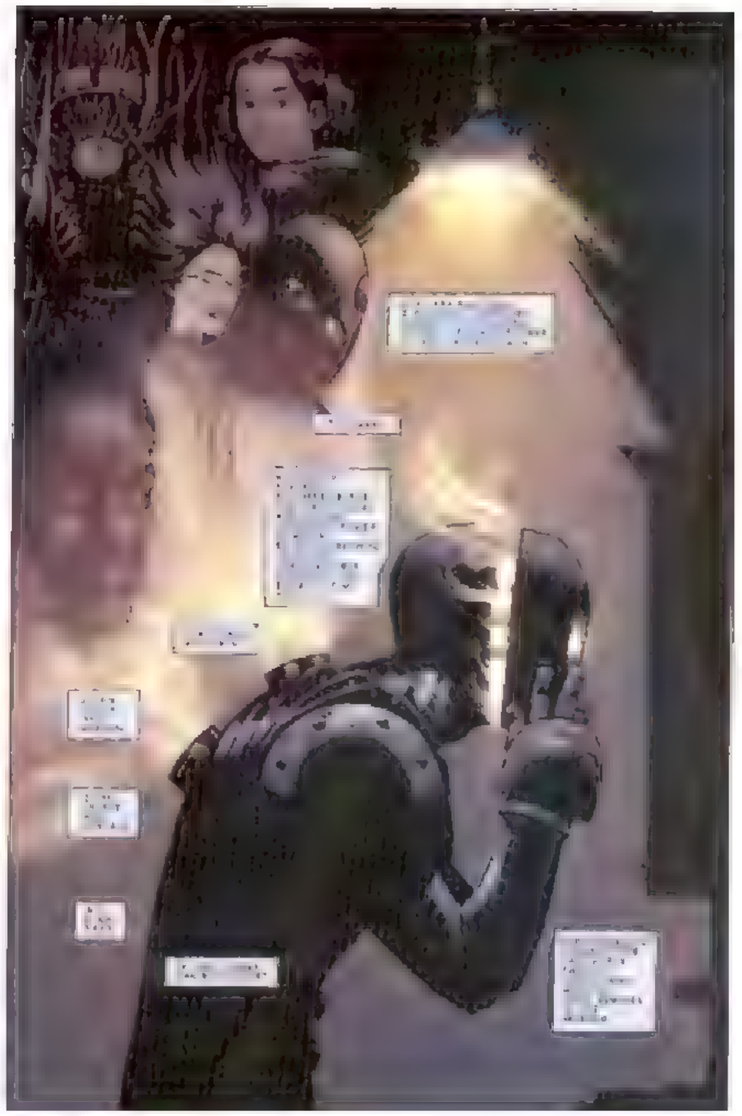
What's on your workslate currently, for Oni and elsewhere?
This sounds like a lot, but it's been staggered over the last few and next few months.
DC - Green Arrow
Oni - Deep Sleeper, The Operation
Dark Horse - Grendel; Red, White, & Black
Image - The Holy Terror, Firebreather

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
I'm a house dad. I get the kids off to school. Answer e-mail, etc. Work until the bus drops off the kids. Work again after they go to bed until I can't stay awake.

Such dedication! Do you work weekends as well? (with that workload, I'd figure you must...)
Sigh...yes.

Do you have a preference for writing, illustrating or doing the whole kit and kaboodle?
I love writing and laying books out. If I could do what Kurtzman did at EC and just layout/ write stories all day I'd be happy.

What's the worst part of the process for you?
Isolation.



J. TORRES

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
I've known Jamie Rich since his Dark Horse days, and was trying to get work from him there. It took about three years and a whole other company before that happened. And now he can't get rid of me!

What's best about working there?
There's nothing like working with people who not only know what they're doing but also love what they're doing.

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
At one Chicago show, Jamie broke away from the Oni booth and ate his lunch under my table in Artists Alley. He did that to hide and escape all the wannabes with portfolios to show. But when my friends looking for work dropped by and saw an honest to gosh editor under the table, he ended up doing portfolio reviews while sitting on the floor.

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
Past credits: Alison Dare, Copybook Tales, Sidekicks, Jason & the Argobots.
Forthcoming: Two graphic novels: Days Like This (the story of a fictitious 60s girl group) and A Comic Tragedy (a kind of satire about the comic biz), plus a sequel to Argobots.

Can you describe your Oni work for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
Alison Dare is an all-ages book about a spunky young girl trying to follow in her adventurous parents' footsteps. Sidekicks is a slice-of-life series about a school for super powered kids. Copybook Tales is a coming of age story about a comic book geek. Jason & the Argobots is about a boy and some giant robots.

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
I usually get up shortly before noon, respond to business related e-mail, faxes and phone calls, then waste time (which could mean anything from doing laundry to taking in a matinee) until I'm ready to write, which is usually around 10 PM and I'll often keep writing till the sun starts to come up.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
Dumped by Andi Watson. I'm a sucker for a good romantic comedy. And we don't get enough of those in comics, really.

JAY STEPHENS

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
Like a frightening number of other Oni creators, I'm an unwanted, ex-Dark Horse cast-off. Sloppy seconds. Worked briefly with Jamie S. Rich while he was still at DH, and he's been my therapist ever since.

What's the best thing about working there?
The best thing? Not having to ever speak to anyone on a phone or ever spend any time with them ever and still they treat you kindly. Not unlike an old, stray dog. You see, I'm a complete misanthropist. Look it up. And while you're there, check out "minnesinger"...

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
Never been to a convention in connection with Oni. I'm telling you, I never spend any time with them ever. Know what's funny? When J. Bone talks about how much he used to love John Byrne. Like when he got letters published in Next Men and everything. Funny. Anecdote.

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
Oni has somehow been talked into reprinting my entire back catalogue, which so far includes The Land of Nod Treasury, Oddville! Go Power! (Atomic City Tales Vol. 1), and is soon to include The Land of Nod Funnies, The Land of Nod Rockabye Book, and Doc Phantom (Atomic City Tales Vol. 2). Last year saw my first new comics for Oni (not including my guest stint in Nocturnals: Troll Bridge), recently collected as Jetcat Clubhouse. My next project for Oni is currently undecided (we'll keep you posted) but is likely to be a standalone graphic novel. In the meantime, I've got a Teen Titans Elseworlds book coming up from DC (with Bob Haney and Doc Allred), and continue to write and draw the monthly kid comic hit Chick and Dee for Canada's popular Chickadee Magazine. Oh, yeah, and I got a Saturday morning cartoon show coming out next summer on NBC based on the *Tutenstein* character from the Oni Jetcat Clubhouse comics. Check out the URL *www.jaystephens.com* for details, folks.

Can you describe your Oni work for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
No. My work is indescribable. You simply must buy the things sight unseen to get the full experience. Seriously. Just go buy the things. My things, I mean. Soon. Yes, you may finish your lunch first if you like. Or take that shower. In fact, PLEASE DO take that shower. You really don't want to be going out in public smelling as you do.

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
I wake to the sound of songbirds and skip to join my two delightful children and their supermodel/ best-selling author mommy for a charming breakfast of tea and crumpets (which young Desi calls, as is the style in the North of England, 'Pieclets' *[possibly 'pikelets', a style of flat yeasty pancake – Pedantry Ed.]*), after which I read to the children from National Geographic or McSweeny's. Then we pile into the solar powered van to drop off the kids at karate lessons. The wife and I go for a quick swim in the lake, or game of ice hockey, and then it's off to the solid gold studio. My indispensable secretary, Judy, fills me in on the day's itinerary, and I settle down into a slow day of sketching cute little wiseacres and muscle bound justice machines while chatting on the videophone to other Famous Cartoonists or the Prime Minister. Sounds pretty boring when you write it all out like that.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
Anything by Andi Watson. His comics smell a lot sweeter than you do before your shower. Goodnight, Thunder Bay!!!

JUDD WINICK

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
I met Oni founders Joe Nozemack and Bob Schreck at the San Diego Comicon in 1998. They asked me if I'd be interested in doing a one pager for Oni Double Feature. That's the truth. All other rumors of blackmail and extortion have been greatly exaggerated. Mostly.

What's the best thing about working there?
No commuting and complete freedom. Most comic companies would fire me for Barry Ween and several states have laws against what I do. But Oni - it's all love and support.
Honestly. I'm lucky. I get to work with my friends.

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
All rumors and blackmail have been greatly exaggerated.

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
I've done a short story called Road Trip and the three Barry Ween miniseries. Oni has published two collections of the now defunct Frumpy the Clown comic strip. They are very generous.
Next year I will begin another Barry Ween series. I write Green Lantern for DC and Exiles for Marvel.

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
I get up everyday and hit the gym first thing. Three words - fat, bald, cartoonist. I embrace the third, I can't stop the second from happening, but the first - I will never allow. Vain, vain man. Upon returning home, I answer email for what I hope is less than an hour, and then I get to writing. If it's not working out, I will take said work on the road – hit a coffee shop and write there. I quit around 7pm... It's all very exciting. I usually lie about this to make it interesting but folks began believing that I get up at 5am. write for six hours and then call it a day, get drunk and work on my real passion – sculpture.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
Barry Ween. I'm hoping to buy a jet or a sports team some day so I need the help. I also mention my own book just to keep it fair. I love Oni books, but in all seriousness - go read Queen & Country. It'll kill ya.

JEN VAN METER

How did your relationship with Oni come about?
I had a prior working relationship with Jamie from his time at Dark Horse; he'd hired me to do an eight-page Buffy story called *MacGuffins* that ran in the DHP Annual '98, my first comics gig. He'd just come over to Oni when they started talking to the *Blair Witch* people about doing a tie-in, and he and Joe thought my background and my interest in the horror genre made me a good choice for writing that.

What's the best thing about working with Jamie, Joe and James?
It's like working with the Weird Sisters from Macbeth, heh. Really, they have this amazing sense of common purpose, they're driven to do everything they do well, and they're a small enough group of people that the decision-making process stays pretty streamlined. I adore them all personally, but beyond that, I think they are incredibly professional,

responsible people, doing business with passion, commitment, and integrity.

What is a typical working day like for the two of you (Van Meter and husband, writer Greg Rucka)?
Um. Probably a lot like most people's; we get up, see that our son gets dressed and brushes teeth and has breakfast, someone makes sure he gets to school, and then we get to work. We do keep our offices at home, so some days turn into being about other stuff and we make up the writing hours at night. It is convenient being in the same town as Oni, because we don't live too far from the offices, and the guys can bring by new art when it's come in on one of our books or drop off proof copies or just hang out.

Can you summarise Hopeless Savages for any Borderline readers who are unfamiliar with the title? (It's always good to have the sales pitch in the creators' own words!)
My favorite 'slug' for Hopeless Savages comes from a review where the guy called it "Everybody Loves the Ramones": a punk rock sit-com. I rolled on the floor laughing. Dirk Hopeless and Nikki Savage were punk stars in the seventies, survived and raised a family; each series is first about family and the shared experience/ memories and events that bind us together and build who we are. The first series is a comedy adventure about the kids rescuing Dirk and Nikki when they've been kidnapped; the second, Hopeless Savages: Ground Zero, is about the youngest daughter's first love. We're developing a third, which I'm calling Hopeless Savages Abroad for the time being right now; it'll return to the adventure element a little more.

What's next for you after the conclusion of Hopeless Savages: Ground Zero? Any projects outside of Oni on the horizon?
In January, DC Comics will be publishing a Batman Elseworlds 64-page one-shot called *Golden Streets of Gotham*, written by me with art from Cliff Chiang and Tommy Lee Edwards; it's been in the works for a while now, and I'm delighted it'll soon be out. I'm pretty proud of this piece and I can't say enough good things about the gorgeous art both men turned in. There's some other stuff in development right now, but I can't say a whole lot about what it is.

MIKE NORTON

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
Well, I was approached by J. Torres about working on Jason and the Argobots and they were already attached to it, so I kind of just fell into it.

What's the best thing about working with Jamie, James and Joe?
They're very responsive. They're also super cool guys. A lot of small press publishers hardly even speak to you much through the duration of a project. It's obvious these guys care about making good stuff.

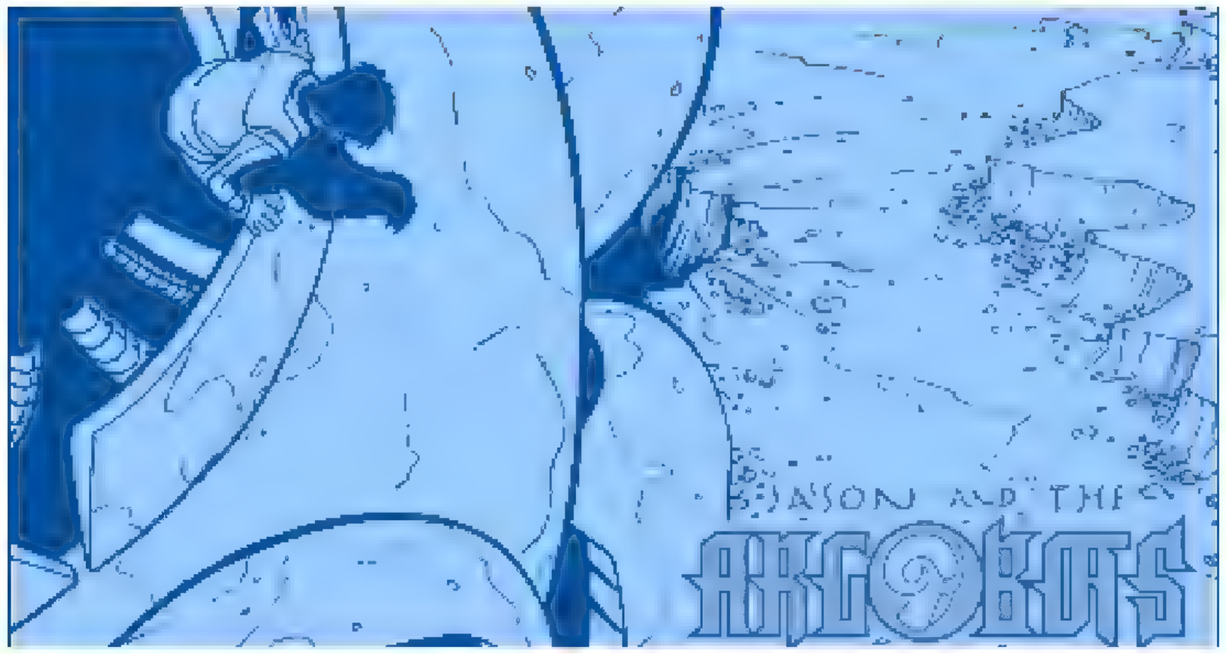
Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
About them? Not really. I'm still new to the group. I got plenty about some other guys though.... ☺

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
Well right now, Jason and the Argobots #2 should be out, with issue #3 soon after. Next year I'm working on some other Oni stuff that I don't know if I'm supposed to talk about yet. Two original graphic novels and a small bit of series work. More Argobots are in the forecast though!

Can you describe Jason and the Argobots for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
Jason and the Argobots is a fun and adventurous story about a boy who finds an intergalactic war machine buried in the desert and uses it for his own. The story is set in the future, where aliens and super-powered individuals coexist with our species, and not all of them are so nice. It's honestly some of the most fun and in my opinion best work I've done, so I hope everyone goes out and buys 'em.

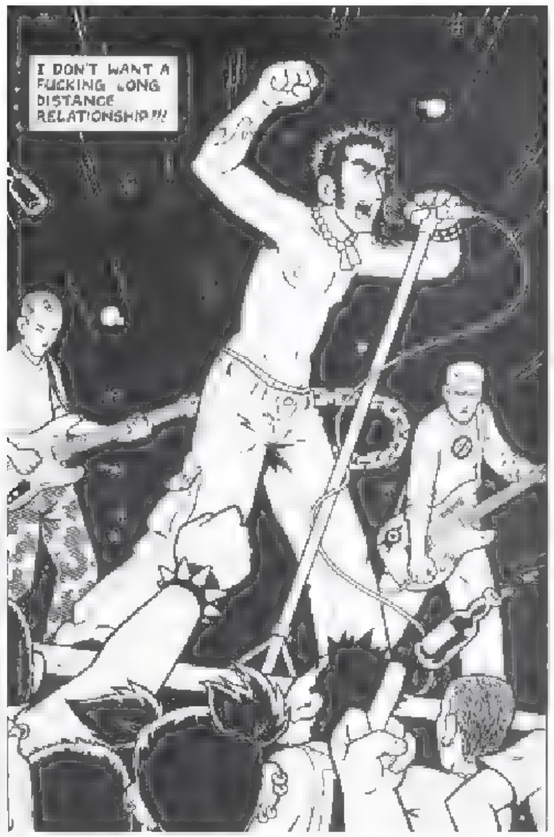
Can you describe a typical working day for you?
Sure. I get up. Work on some design work and draw for about eight hours, go home and then draw for about another eight. I'm a very boring person. ☺

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
Jason and the Argobots of course. Any title *other* than my own? I really like Hopeless Savages right now... and I'm a big fan of Blue Monday as well. Seriously though, not to sound like I'm sucking up or something, but I really like most of what Oni is putting out these days... it's just one of those coincidences, I guess.



STEVE ROLSTON

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
I first started working for Oni two years ago. I'd already known the Oni boys for a few years. I hung out on their message board and I would usually go to the San Diego con each summer. I was "that annoying Canadian kid." They had seen my online portfolio and Jamie would sometimes force me to show him more stuff at San Diego, even though I wasn't very confident about it. Then one day Joe happened to be looking at a page of my artwork on Scott Morse's website (I wrote and drew a five-page story for an anthology that never got published). At the time, Oni was still trying to find an artist for Greg Rucka's new spy series, Queen & Country. Joe got the crazy idea that I might fit the job. So I did some character sketches, Greg liked them and I got the gig. Naturally I was ecstatic, especially since I'd quit my animation job a year earlier to pursue a career in comics.



What's the best thing about working with Jamie, James and Joe?
They have faith in me. And they seem to care about making sure I'm doing projects that I enjoy. That, and they giggle like schoolgirls.

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
Sorry, it's all classified. And since I'd like to keep working with Oni, I'm gonna remain gagged.

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
I drew the first four issues of Greg Rucka's Queen & Country, eight pages of Paul Dini's Jingle Belle Jubilee (which will be collected with some other stories in November's Jingle Belle's Cool Yule trade paperback), the four-page *Technorganic: Mechanized Fate* story Sabina Ex Machina wrote for the 2002 Oni Press Color Special, and the 3-issue Pounded mini-series with Brian Wood (which will be collected in October), as well as the Pounded strips we did for the Oni Press website and the *Official Pounded Soundtrack* we put out through Springman Records. I also collaborated with Oni writer J. Torres on *Close*, a two-page story in the 9-11 Vol.1 anthology from Chaos/ DarkHorse/Image.

Right now I'm pencilling Mek, a three-issue mini-series for Wildstorm/DC Comics. It's written by Warren Ellis, inked by Al Gordon and coloured by David Baron. It's looking awesome so far. The first issue comes out in November and I can't wait to see it in print. After I wrap up Mek, I'll be working on an original graphic novel that's set to come out next summer from Oni. It's a crime story that I will be writing, drawing and lettering myself.

Can you describe your Oni work for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
Well, it's hard to describe my body of work since each project has had a different writer. I would describe my artwork as "not too ugly." Other people have commented on the clean lines, the attention to detail, and the expressiveness/subtlety of the characters. Luckily I think most of the people who called my artwork "too cartoony" have since changed their minds.

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
I used to sleep in until noon but I've somehow managed to re-program myself to get up at 8:30 these days. I usually spend a couple hours dealing with email and pissing time away on message boards. The rest of the day is a battle between drawing and getting distracted. I get distracted very easily. That's why I have to continue the battle until late at night and through the weekend. I get most of my work done during the deadline crunch. I don't get much sleep then but it's an acceptable sacrifice.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
That's a tough call. I'm gonna have to go with Breakfast Afternoon by Andi Watson. It's top-notch work - both writing and story. And I think the subject matter is something most people can relate to.

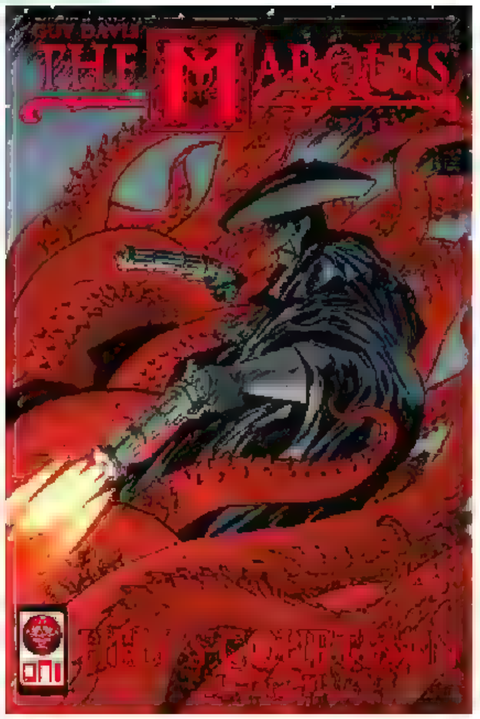
GUY DAVIS

What do you have coming up from Oni?
The 3-part The Midwife story is still planned to lead into the full six issue Marquis: Devil's Reign series. The upcoming one-shot, A Sinful One, was originally planned to be a short story for the next trade collection (that would collect Hell's Courtesan and The Midwife). We figured it was better to run it as a full issue first; it's pretty much a stand-alone story but it also ties the shorter mini-series together. Like Hell's Courtesan and The Midwife, A Sinful One will focus on one of the escaped devils of Hell, one who has found a way around being hunted by the Marquis; he kills himself first and escapes into another living soul.

What projects are you juggling for other publishers at the moment?
Right now I'm working on a new miniseries for Marvel that should be out the beginning of next year. I've also been doing the art chores on a Batman Elseworlds mini-series that should finally see print in 2003. But unfortunately I can't say much more about either until they officially announce them. Alongside those I'm working on a new Nevermen 3-issue miniseries with Phil Amara for Dark Horse, and I also just did the covers for the last two volumes of Lone Wolf and Cub #27 and #28 with Vince Locke.

How did your relationship with Oni come about in the first place?
I got a call from Jamie Rich who wanted me to draw a short story for the first Blair Witch comic, he also mentioned that he was interested in seeing the Marquis proposal, since I was looking for a new publisher. I had sent off proposals to a couple other companies at the time, so I sent them the pitch and then drew up the Blair Witch story to sort of test the waters. They liked the Marquis and I liked working with them on the short story, so I definitely wanted to take the Marquis series to them.

What's the best thing about working with them, for you?
Well, I'd have to say I like the fact that they let you do what you want when it comes to the actual comic. They'll give you an honest opinion if they think something doesn't work, but they'll leave it up to you if you want to change it or keep it like it is. They're pretty hands-off with creator-owned books, which is pretty rare for most companies out there, that see it only as product. For Oni, it seems that if they want to publish



your book they definitely want you to do what you do and not try to change it for sales or gimmicks for mass readership. They really care about the quality of books they publish and they're also a bunch of pretty nice guys.

Can you describe what a typical working day is like for you?
I usually work nights, so I get up around 1pm or so (meaning more like 2pm) and then run errands and make calls to editors after grabbing breakfast and sending off whatever's due to FedEx. I usually start work around 5 or so and then work straight through until around 4-6am (taking breaks along the way). I usually work seven days a week like that until I finish up a deadline and then take a couple days break if I can before jumping on the next job. If possible I like to pencil up the entire job before I start inks; the mini-series I'm working on are all penciled up, so now I'm going through and inking them. Usually I pencil pretty quickly (and loosely, since I'm inking it myself), around four-six pages a day. Inking takes a bit longer, but I like to do at least two pages a day.

Could you encapsulate the essence of The Marquis for any of our readers who are unfamiliar with it?
The Marquis is a sort of action/horror series that tells the story of Vol de Galle, a man of the Inquisition in a fictional 18th century town. He has been given the ability to see into the souls of the townspeople and hunt out the escaped devils of Hell, but whether it's a blessing or curse is another matter. The first miniseries, Danse Macabre, tells of Vol's beginnings as the Marquis and his crusade. It focuses on both his unholy faith and insanity as the reader isn't totally sure if he's actually seeing these devils or just killing the innocent. But by the end of the first series you have the answer as well as a couple of twists along the way.

CHRISTINE NORRIE

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
Jen and Jamie were looking for an artist for Hopeless Savages and came across my work in Action Girl. Jamie phoned me up and that was that.

What's the best thing about working with Jamie, James and Joe?
The freedom to be yourself. Working with them, they really make you feel like you count. If I'm concerned about something I can email or call and we can discuss anything! We can be very serious talking about art and business, then joke around and laugh the next minute. They're very honest and have all of our best intentions in mind. And, they send free comics. Free comics!

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
I've only been to two with Oni, but I fondly remember last year's Chicago Wizard World where we had dinner in the restaurant that spins atop the hotel. Every time we turned a certain side, we'd hear all the bad Beatles' fans from the Beatles Con doing their awful acoustic sing-a-longs. Oh, and that night a friend of mine spilled a drink on Jamie's lap. Not funny for Jamie, but I couldn't resist laughing. May have been because I had a few too many drinks...

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
Let's see, I did the first Hopeless Savages series and the Oni Color Special 2001 and 2002. Next, I have my first original graphic novel with Oni (or anyone), a romance called Cheat.

Can you describe your Oni work for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
Hopeless Savages is crazy, fun, black and white love (some color if you get the first collected paperback). It's the story of an unusual family and the choices they make, the clothes they wear, and the fantastic lives they lead. It's not like any other series you see around!

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
Okay, get up at 8-8:30am. Eat breakfast, send hubby off to work. Walk dog with friends. Come back and feed dog, three cats, one parakeet, and one newly-acquired stray flop-eared bunny. Check email and respond to maybe one of ten received. Delete half and promise to reply to others later on.

Work on current project for a few hours, probably pencilling layouts or inking a story. Let dog out in backyard and eat lunch. Bring the dog back in and discover he's brought over his doggie friends from next door. Check email again and write Jamie back about whatever nonsense he's on about in which he's probably called me a few names. Promise to reply to others later.

Do some filing or whatever administrative type things I need to do then work more on project until about six. Send doggie friends home and bring my dog inside. Get a snack, and bring current project into living room so I can idly work while watching *Law & Order*. Check email one last time and really really promise to reply to others tomorrow.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
That's a tough question which I can't answer without asking who am I recommending this book to. Do you like espionage thrillers? Queen & Country. Have a feel for teen angst? Blue Monday. How about mystery noir? One Plus One. Holiday hijinks? Jingle Belle! See, Oni Press has just about everything...

GARY PHILLIPS

How did you come to be working with Oni Press?
I came to be doing work with Oni through my buddy Greg Rucka. As it happens, we have the same agent, and he was kind enough to serve as a conduit to Joe, Jamie and James. I could tell from the type of work that Oni did then - Rucka's Whiteout, Dan Brereton's Nocturnals and so on - that it was a house where the sort of stories I like to tell might find a home... to strangle that metaphor. You should also know that I'm a frustrated comic book artist, and I've been reading comics for decades.

What's the best thing about working with Jamie, James and Joe?
The best thing, since this is my first real foray into pro comics (decades ago I was involved in fanzines), is I get to work with some cats who know what they're doing and are willing to mix it up in terms of content and style. And I'm so jazzed that they brought Brett Weldele onto the story arc we've recently concluded. Comics being a visual medium, the story lives or dies because of the artists. They are, rightly, the heroes of this medium, and Brett's work captured the mood and look of Shot Callerz.

Any anecdotes or convention stories you can share with us?
Sorry, no swell anecdotes or convention stories - at least not comics-related convention stories. Coming from the world of mystery and crime writing, I've got plenty of drunken debauchery and poker-into-the-night tales from the mystery convention circuit. And not to forget some infamous basketball games certain mystery writers and fans have engaged in to varying degrees of competency.

What have you done for Oni to date, and what's coming up next, at Oni or other publishers?
For Oni, the four-part Shot Callerz crime book has just finished. Next up with the gang is something called Midnight Mover, and is, well, I don't want to give too much away, but it's fair to say in Hollywood logline parlance, it's *Boogie Nights* meets *The Fugitive*. On the prose front, I've got a little something called The Perpetrators now out from Ugly Town, a cool indie press here in L.A. (owned by Tom Fassbender and Jim Pascoe, who had been the writing team on the Buffy, the Vampire Slayer comic book), with a cover and spot illos by Paul Pope. And coming up soon is a novella, Tyson, set in the underground world of pit bull fighting, from an imprint called True Ink.

Can you describe your Oni work for any of our readers who have yet to experience it?
My work for Oni is in the crime/mystery genre. There's been this resurgence of these kinds of stories in the comic book field and I'm happy to have the opportunity to give my spin on some of this. The trick is to make your approach as fresh as you can given there are only, what, eight or nine motivations – revenge, love, lust, greed, curiosity, altruism, guilt, boredom, fear – that propel your characters through a story. And particularly when the writer is competing with folks' recreational dollars that can be spent on blockbuster movies, video games, WWE events, whatever. So it's incumbent on you as part of the creative process to step up, give the people something for their three bucks. Especially as you want them to come back to your work time and time again.

Can you describe a typical working day for you?
A typical working day has different pacing and allotments of time. Right now, I have a novel that's due in November so I try to write three to five pages a day to stay on task. When I'm writing comic book scripts, and I work from a pretty tight outline that me and the gents at Oni have gone over, I try to produce three to five pages of the script a day, then re-read and edit the completed script once it's done. But, as I know the next story arc I'm doing for Oni is coming up, I know I have to divide my day so that I might work on the novel in the morning and work on the comic book script in the afternoon. And there's also days when I'm doing that Hollywood Shuffle shit, and going to do a pitch. One of my series characters, Martha Chainey, an ex-showgirl now gun-toting cold cash courier for the new Vegas mob, has garnered some nibbles from TV, so I go out and do that dog and pony show now and then.

If you had to recommend one Oni title, which one would it be, and why?
I can't possible recommend just one Oni title. I can tell you I read Queen & Country, Pounded [*a 3-part miniseries by Brian Wood and Steve Rolston*], Kissing Chaos [*by Arthur Dela Cruz*] (my teenaged daughter Chelsea loves this title), Skinwalker [*by Nunzio DeFilippis & Christina Weir, Brian Hurtt & Arthur Dela Cruz*], Hopeless Savages [*by Jen Van Meter and various*], Mutant, Texas [*by Paul Dini*], and the various permutations of the Nocturnals [*by Dan Brereton*] regularly.

WE DID IT, PHILIP, WE DID IT.
ALL THE WAY, BABY GIRL, ALL THE WAY.
I'LL BRING THE CAR UP. YOU GET OUR MONEY.
OH YEAH.
KA-BLAM
KA-BLAM
AIN'T THAT ABOUT NOTHIN'? HE PLAYED ME LIKE I WAS SOME STUPID HOOD RAT! I SWORE I WAS NEVER GONNA BECOME A G.I. JANE BUT A FINE BODY AND A FACE THAT WOULD MAKE TAYE DIGGS JEALOUS GET NEXT TO ME, SHIT.

All the illustrations in this article relate to the creators being interviewed. Borderline would like to thank Oni Press and Jamie Rich for all their cooperation in making this major article, and to all of the creators who took the time to talk about themselves and help promote their work and the company that supports them.

ELEMENTARY WATSON

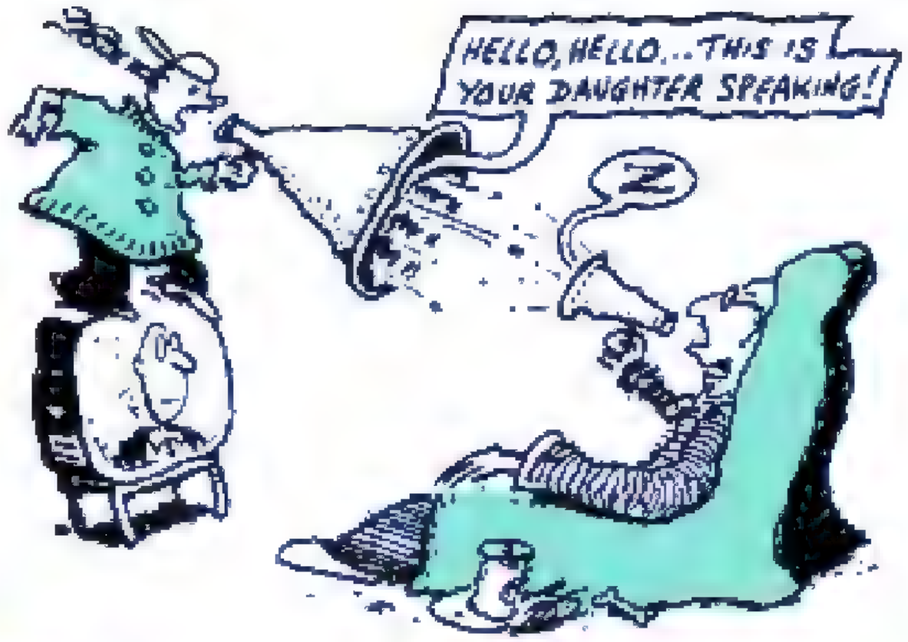
THE work of cartoonist, illustrator and animation artist John Watson, who died at the premature age of 40, two years ago, is to be the subject of an exhibition at the Royal College of Art in London during November.

Born in Aberdeen in 1960, Watson studied painting at that city's Gray's College of Art but indicated other interests when he wrote his dissertation on book illustrator Edward Ardizzone. Moving to London and the Royal College of Art, he produced the cartoon-filled Spy magazine and, in 1986, won the Macmillan Prize for his children's book Shh! It's The Secret Club!. In the late 1980s and early 1990s his cartoons were a familiar sight in many mainstream magazines, ranging from *Marxism Today* to *The Telegraph*, *Good Housekeeping* to *Men Only*, and *Punch* to *New Scientist*. His inky Punk/New Wave-influenced style proved highly adaptable to being either charmingly childlike or savagely satirical as occasion demanded, and received considerable critical acclaim.

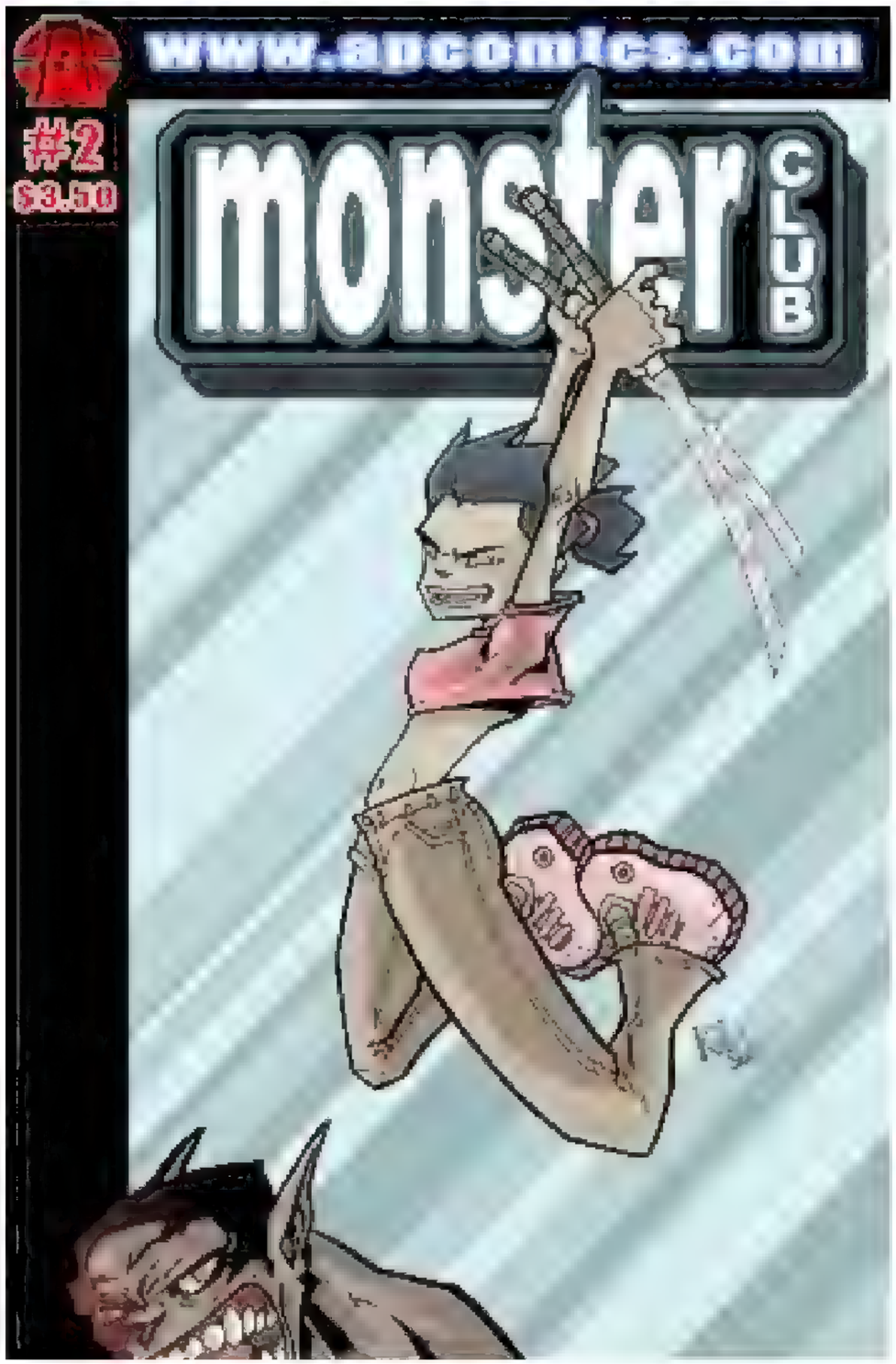
Watson worked in television as well, producing the animated film *Black Cat* for Channel 4 in 1988, illustrating Edward Lear poems for the same channel, and developing the "Captain Polluta" character for Spitting Image productions, broadcast by the BBC in 1996 as *Bigg New World*. He was also a drummer, with R'n'B band Hackney Five-O.

A selection of his comics, cartoon and illustration work can be viewed at the Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore, London SW7, England, from November 13 to November 24, between the hours of 10am and 6pm. Dates for further exhibitions in Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh are still to be confirmed.

For further information, contact Natasha Mongroo at *Natasha@helmwall.co.uk*, or telephone (UK) 020 8968 6454, or fax (UK) 020 8968 6459.



BORN FROM CHAOS



A new publisher has risen to champion the cause of British comics in the 21st century. Borderline's Mike Sivier learns how to join the Monster Club - and meets the faces behind this trend-bucking new force.

BRITAIN has produced a new comics publisher in the shape of APComics.com - a brainchild of Richard Emms, owner of the Chaos City Comics shop in St Albans. The company's first title, **Monster Club**, by talented newcomer Kit Wallis, is to be released in comics shops in December. Another title, **Final Fury**, is already slotted to appear in 2003.

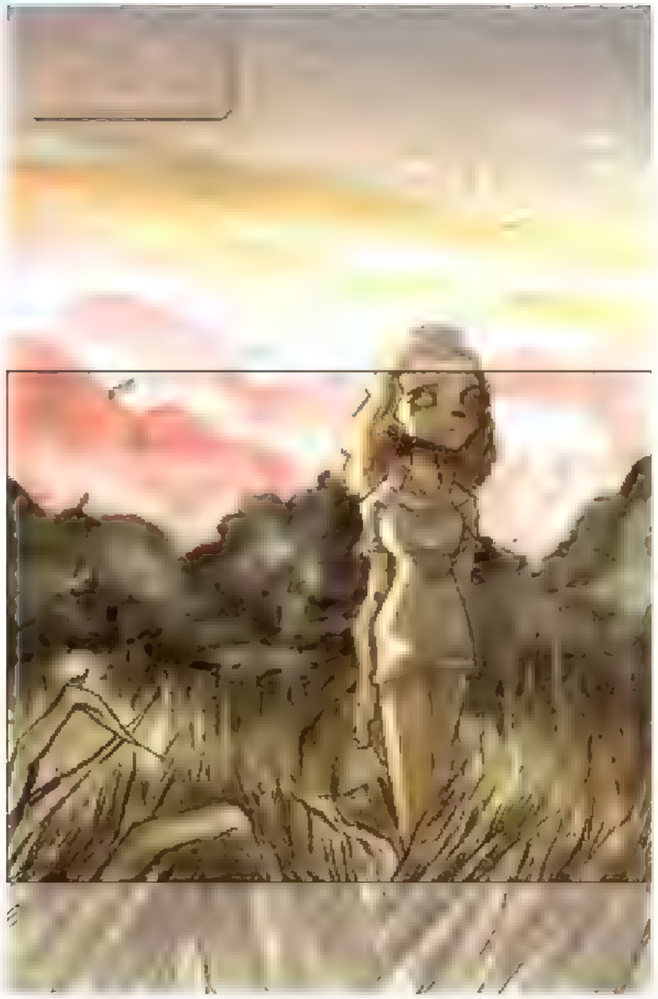
Richard Emms, director of APComics.com, had been working in the comics industry for 12 years before moving into publishing. He said: "**Monster Club** is a great looking comic. We've been working on it for over eight months now - making sure that it is just right for today's market. Kit's art looks stunning and will surprise even the biggest of publishing names."

Emms added that APComics would also apply a consumer confidence policy to all of its first issues: "If we do not ship **Monster Club** #1 to Diamond Comics in the month of December, we are offering any fan ordering it a full refund - direct from us to them! No questions asked. As a publisher we feel that we have to get behind the retailers, to make sure that they stock our book and that regular sales for them means regular business for us."

The new title is likely to stir up interest - and not only because it comes from a new British publisher: "We also have interest from an international animation producer," said Emms. "Treehouse Productions has worked with many TV and film companies, and currently has a series on the Disney Channel called *Untalkative Bunny*."

At a time when most British publishers would not touch comics with a bargepole, it may seem strange for anybody to speculate on the shrinking market. But Richard Emms has been around the comics world for a long time, and he thinks the time is right for a resurgence. He told **Borderline**: "I've always been interested in publishing. I was a journalist, so comic book publishing is a step upwards for me - honest!"

Richard went on to run the Chaos City Comics shop, and it was here that he put together his first self-published comic. He explains: "My first comic book



publishing experience dates back to 1993, when I got some really talented creators together, including Bryan Hitch, Liam Sharp and Dave Gibbons, to work on a comic book about AIDS awareness, creatively titled, err, **AIDS Awareness**. I loved the buzz of putting that together, although I lost lots of money. It did get on MTV, though."

So who is Kit Wallis, the creator of **Monster Club**? How did he come aboard? "I can remember the day when I first met Kit in the shop. That was 12 years ago - a few weeks after I opened the shop. Kit was so different from the other guys producing their own home-made comic. Kit would come into the shop every other week with something he had produced. A photocopied, black and white ashcan featuring his latest creation. Even back then you could see he had massive potential - and that was when he was 10 years of age. Some people just have it!"

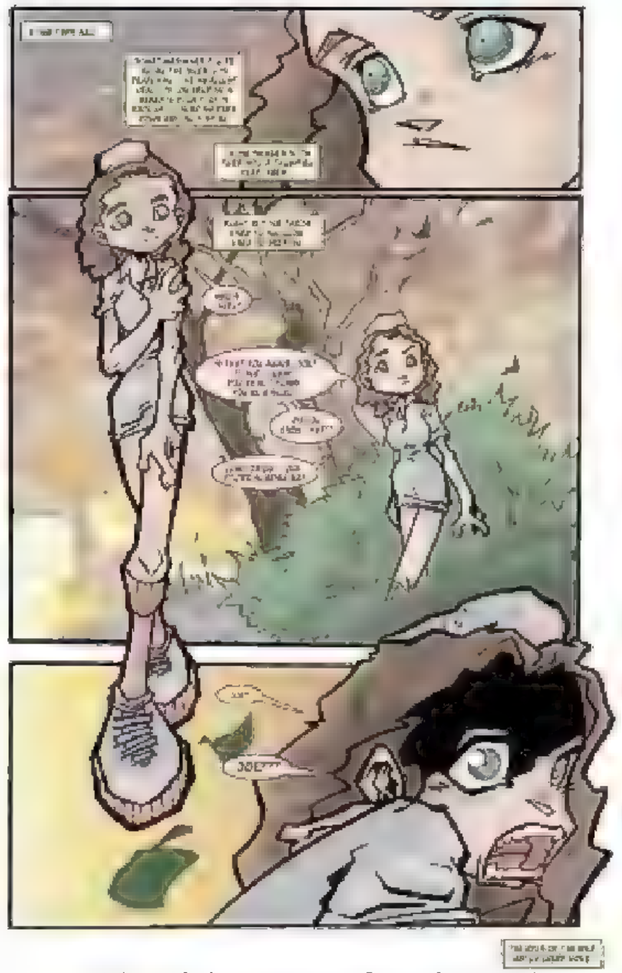
How did Kit finally manage to break into comics? "Four years ago I had an idea for a story", replied Emms. "Something I've wanted to do is to write a comic - but never had the guts, or money, to publish it. I asked Kit if he would like to do the art. It would be great to see my ideas come to life. I can draw, but not that well. Only got an A level in art - unlike Kit, who has a First class BA in illustration! We did three issues - it was fun and a real learning curve."

Then Kit took a break, wanting to define an art style with which he was happy. Emms said: "Kit has always been a manga fan. It was my fault that I tried to get Kit to produce a more mainstream style of art. Kit came back to me with a project he wanted to do - namely **Monster Club**. He'd done a handful of pages, fully coloured, which blew me away. So, of course, I said yes to his ideas and project.

"Kit finished a 22-page story - writing, with some editing and re-writing; drawing, and changing at least ten pages; and colouring the whole issue. We digitally printed 50 copies to show around Bristol's Comics 2002 festival, as well as sending them to Diamond Comics and other, smaller distributors. The feedback we got back was more than we could've ever imagined. I was really surprised by the response." Diamond told Richard and Kit that, whenever they were ready to solicit **Monster Club**, the company would be happy to distribute it. "I can't thank Filip Sablik at Diamond enough for all his help and guidance." Richard said.

But how did a comic shop owner and his artist friend metamorphose into a new comics company? "We showed the **Monster Club** preview comic to a friend of ours, Phil Littler, who runs an animation studio just around the corner from us. He was extremely impressed with Kit's art - so much so that he wanted to produce some animation shorts for the World Wide Web, knowing that this could help the comic sales." Two **Monster Club** animations were produced, lasting two minutes in total - but they might never see the light of day. Richard explained: "Our animation direction has now changed and the time is spent on marketing **Monster Club** ready for TV. Phil really wants to see the comic do well - in fact he's now a director of APComics and has invested money, and a huge amount of time, into an ongoing publishing venture. I've always wanted to be part of a publishing company, looking out for the next big comic creator and seeing our stuff in stores around the globe."

So, what could Emms tell us about **Monster Club**? "We are very excited about **[it]**- not only as a comic but also as a potential TV series - but our main goal at the moment is to get the first issue out and on time. **Monster Club** #1 will definitely ship in December 2002. To promote the title, we produced a 16 page preview for retailers in September - which includes an exclusive short story, three pages from issue #1 and three pages from issue #2. We over-printed the preview book, so for those who are interested it is available to purchase from our website."



Monster Club will be followed by another book - planned to be released early next year - called **Final Fury**. Enter another talent, Jimmy O'Ready. Jimmy, like Kit, is a customer at Chaos City Comics. "Obviously knowing Jimmy as a customer - and never knowing he was such a talented guy; he kept that one quiet - I bumped into him at the Bristol 2002 show where he was showing around his portfolio", said Emms. "Jimmy works as a computer games/animation designer and has worked on comics such as **Roy Of**

*T*he **Rovers**, *Judge Dredd* and the 2000AD **Megazine**. Knowing that we were going to publish **Monster Club**, Jimmy approached us with a creation he had been working on."

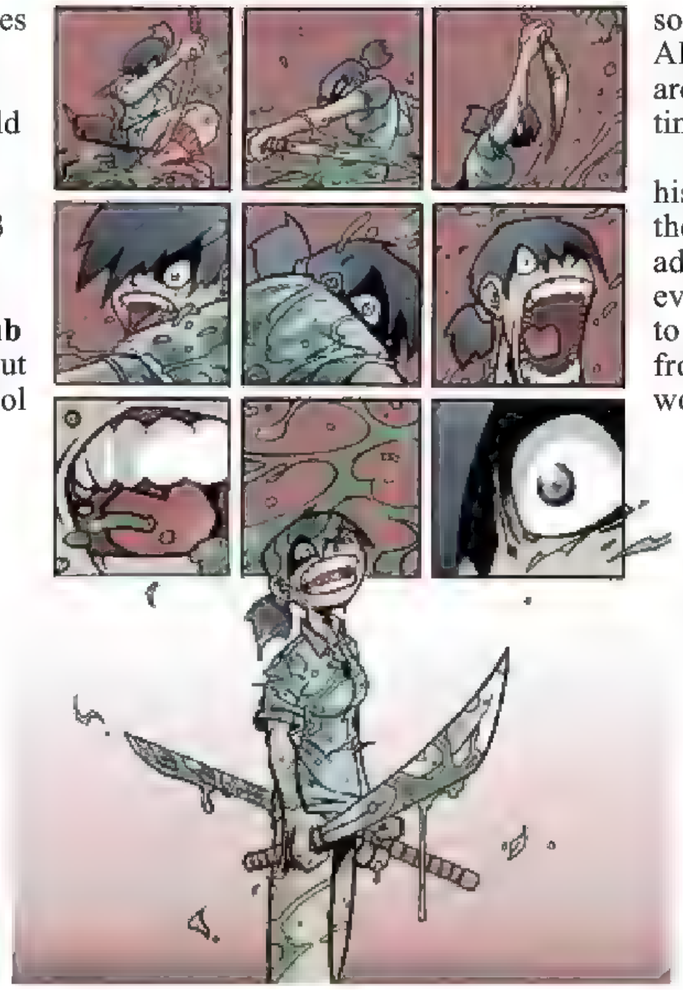
So what's it about? Richard refuses to be drawn. All he would tell us was: "Fans who like titles such as **BattleChasers** and the CrossGen books will love **Final Fury**." The series launches in January or February next year with a special issue #0, followed by six issues, shipping either quarterly or bi-monthly. Issue #0 contains two exclusive stories, along with character designs. The cover price will be $2.95 as it is a 24-page book. Issue #1, 32 pages long, will ship the following month.

What else does the future hold for the nascent company? Richard said: "We will be attending the next Comics 2003 show in Bristol next year as a publisher. Our aim is to have at least six issues of **Monster Club** and two issues of **Final Fury** out on the shelves by the time Bristol comes around. I would love a trade paperback of **Monster Club** to grace the show with - but that's the next step. Right now, though, we do have enough material for a TPB."

Perhaps more importantly, APComics is to launch **Monster Club** through UK newsstands next spring - flying in the face of current trends towards a dwindling comicbook presence in newsagents. Richard said: "We had a meeting with WH Smith - who were really impressed with the whole **Monster Club** concept and animation direction. It seems that comics are the flavour of the month."

In conclusion, Richard added: "I must let people know that over the past 12 months or so I have been working with the guys at Com.X. I've known the directors - Eddie, Russell and Neil - for a few years now. They all work really hard - making some rather outstanding looking comic books - and it shows! I am still part of the Com.X team - and I will be until the day hell freezes over! They've also been instrumental in helping me, as a publisher, to make APComics' comics look great. I've worked really hard, selling the Com.X brand and never once, when contacting retailers, told them about the APComics thing - although all at Com.X said they were happy for me to promote APC's books. That's not my bag! When I work for Com.X - I work solely for Com.X. APComics sales are done in my time."

What about his own future, then? "I must admit that, eventually, I want to move away from retail and work more in marketing. I love comics. I love the industry. The only thing I hate is that there are not enough days in the week to do everything! Shame."



Monster Club will ship with a card stock cover and glossy interior pages.

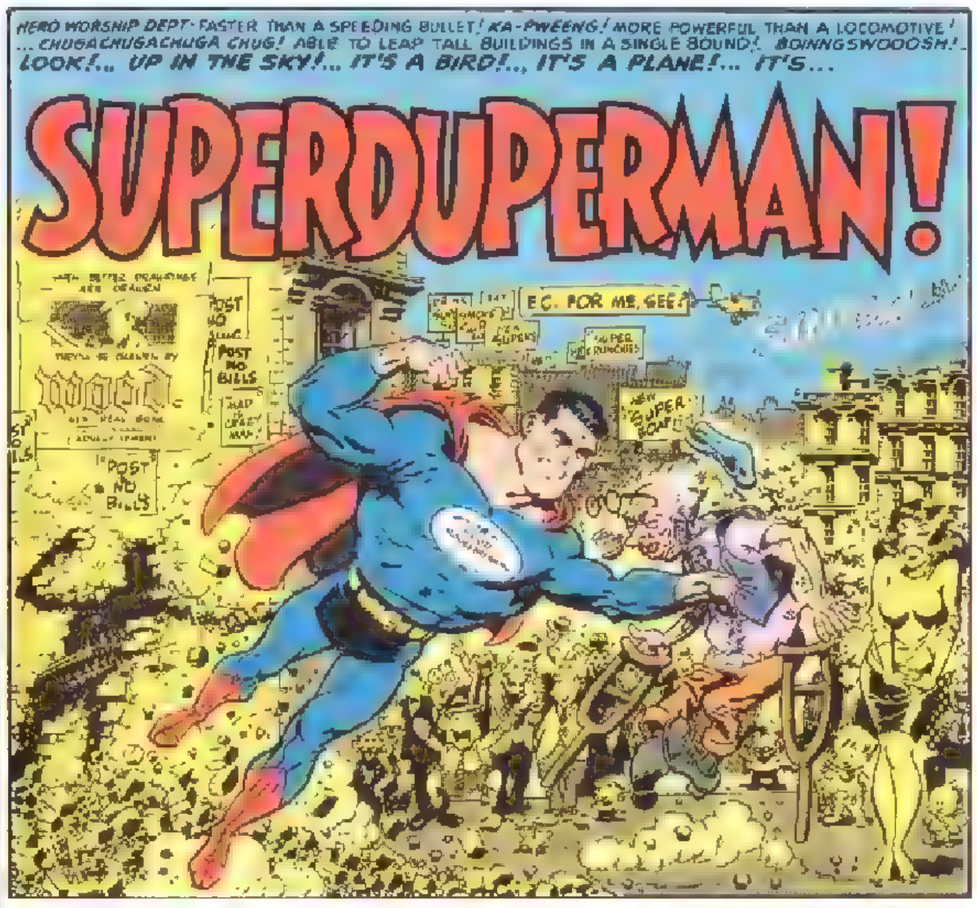
The cover price is $3.50.

All pictures and images from Monster Club and Final Fury.

IN SEARCH OF... WALLY WOOD

One of these months David McLintock is going to go in search of an artist by whom none of the editors has a stack of comics to scan, then we'll all be in trouble... so far so good, though!

THE current vogue in clinical psychiatry is for a management technique based on "Risk Assessment". So when one says to one's psychiatric nurse better half, "Darling, what if a guy were an obsessional genius, an embittered employee, depressed, alcoholic, needing kidney dialysis, oh, and a gun nut?" it doesn't take much of her skill to retort "When did he shoot himself?" Sadly, she was spot on. Wally Wood was a tortured soul, whose genius lives on more than 20 years after his tragic suicide in 1981. I first got into Wood via the time-honoured route of liking one artist (you guessed, Ditko) and exploring the comics world for others with a similar style. The fact that he also showed large chunks of Eisner influence only helped to make Wood even more pleasing to these eyes.

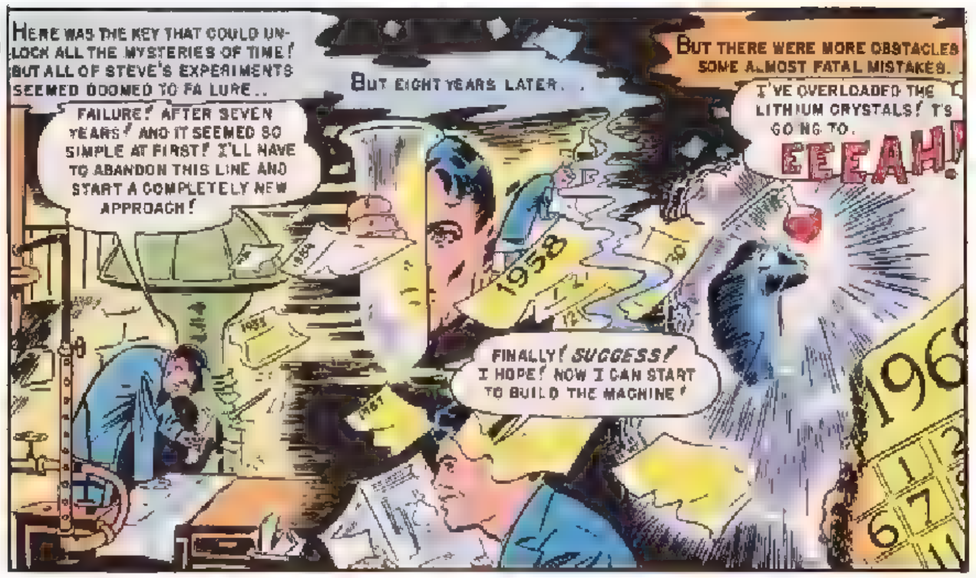

HERO WORSHIP DEPT: FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET! KA-PWEENG! MORE POWERFUL THAN A LOCOMOTIVE! ...CHUGACHUGACHUGA CHUG! ABLE TO LEAP TALL BUILDINGS IN A SINGLE BOUND! BONNGSWOOOSH!
LOOK!... UP IN THE SKY!... IT'S A BIRD!... IT'S A PLANE!... IT'S...
SUPERDUPERMAN!
EC. FOR ME, GEE!
POST NO BILLS
POST NO BILLS
NEW SUPER SCOUT!

One of the finest satirical panels in US comicbooks - from EC's Mad #3 (1953)

Not just my eyes. There is a welter of Wood on the web (I can't believe I just wrote that...) and what follows can only be a taster for the treats out there *(more alliteration, please... – Production Ed.)*.

Where better to start than with our old pal John Hitchcock again, and his "Wally Wood Letters" at *www.tvparty.com/comics/wood.html* ? A very short intro gives a biography of Wood, then it's on to 18 letters between the two. A letter of October 1977, where Wood considers going into the publishing business for himself, would keep handwriting analysts busy for weeks, and, given even a limited knowledge of the subject, indicates wild mood swings (if the text books on graphology are accurate). The letters are illustrated throughout, a lovely panel from Blazing Combat #4, (Warren, 1966) being a prime example of Wood at his best. Letter 13 contains the gem, " I resent guys like Stan Lee more than I can say... I want to see that no talent bum get his." It leaves one in no doubt as to Wally's feelings for Mr. Lieber.

www.tvparty.com/comics/woodPIC.html is "The Response to the Wally Wood Letters" by one Timothy Osterlund, which would be as naff as, but there are lots of photos of Wood in happier times, and at least one

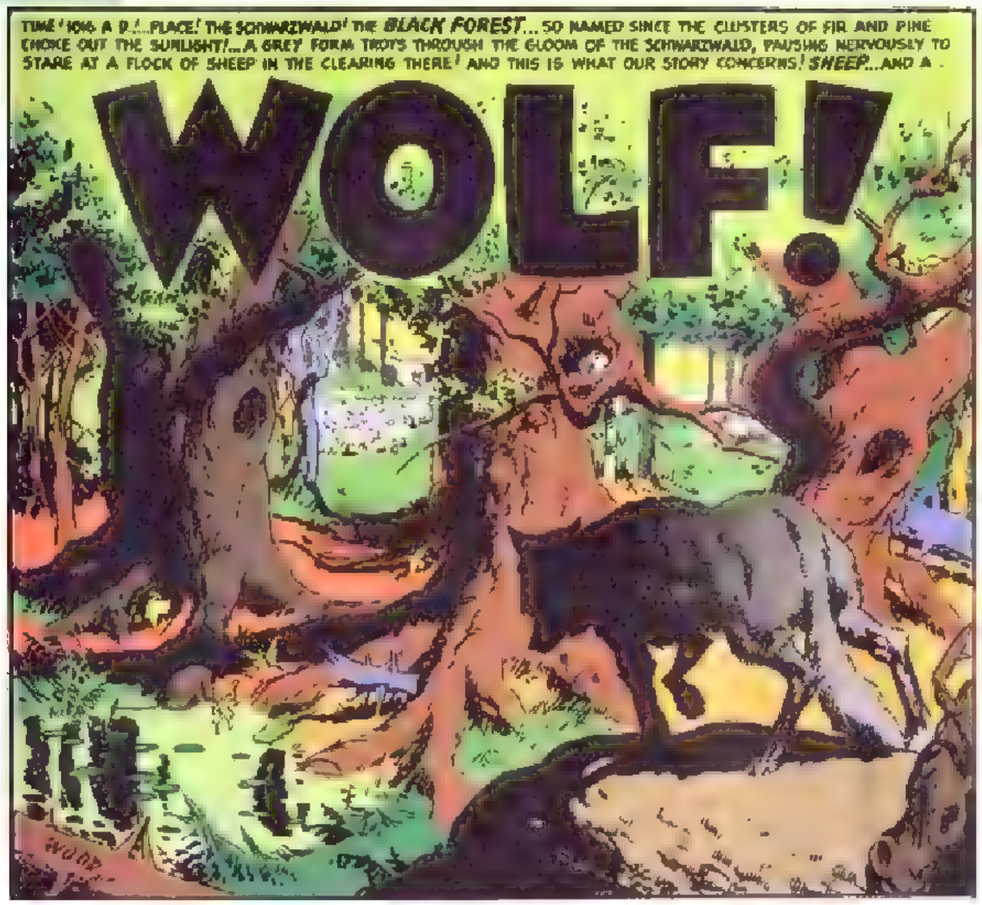

HERE WAS THE KEY THAT COULD UNLOCK ALL THE MYSTERIES OF TIME! BUT ALL OF STEVE'S EXPERIMENTS SEEMED DOOMED TO FAILURE...
FAILURE! AFTER SEVEN YEARS! AND IT SEEMED SO SIMPLE AT FIRST! I'LL HAVE TO ABANDON THIS LINE AND START A COMPLETELY NEW APPROACH!
BUT EIGHT YEARS LATER...
BUT THERE WERE MORE OBSTACLES SOME ALMOST FATAL MISTAKES.
I'VE OVERLOADED THE LITHIUM CRYSTALS! IT'S GOING TO...
EEEAH!
FINALLY! SUCCESS! I HOPE! NOW I CAN START TO BUILD THE MACHINE!
1958
1966

Starting out - inking Harry Harrison in EC's Weird Fantasy #13 (1950)

letter from him which seems quite emotionally balanced. Wood was the major influence on comics' superstar Loston Wallace (what do you mean, you've never heard of old Loston?). All is revealed at *www.lostonwallace.com/index.htm*. Our even older buddies at *www.lambiek.net/wood.htm* are the source for "Wood took his own life rather than facing dependency on kidney dialysis". Which adds more flavour yet to the biog of Wood by Bud Plant at *www.budplant.com/bio.itml/icOid/8288*, which features the following quote from Wally, "Do not seek to be a creative writer or artist. Do not *care* about doing anything good. That will only put you at the mercy of those who will always hate you because you can do something they can't." Strong stuff. Another Wood quote (about his inking style) could keep an army of existentialists awake for a whole conference: "First outline everything, go back and ink everything that should be black, and then make a few things black that shouldn't be black." The Rolling Stones did a song about that once...

Bud has a longer biog for Wally at *www.bpib.com/illustrat/wood.htm* which features some lovely artwork from Wood's EC days, where

A UK reprint of the cover from Tower's Dynamo #3 (1967)


TIME! 1016 A.D.! PLACE! THE SCHWARZWALD! THE BLACK FOREST... SO NAMED SINCE THE CLUSTERS OF FIR AND PINE CHOKE OUT THE SUNLIGHT!... A GREY FORM TROTS THROUGH THE GLOOM OF THE SCHWARZWALD, PAUSING NERVOUSLY TO STARE AT A FLOCK OF SHEEP IN THE CLEARING THERE! AND THIS IS WHAT OUR STORY CONCERNS! SHEEP... AND A
WOLF!
WOOD

Light and shade - from EC's Frontline Combat #13 (1953)

the Eisner influence is obvious - but then, given that Wood did extensive work for Eisner in the early '50s, could you expect anything else? A more detailed biog is at *http://www.allaboutcomix.com/artist-woodwally.html*, which gives even more details of the personal demons besetting poor Wood: "his relentless work habits, chain smoking, excessive alcohol and coffee consumption left him in poor health by the end of the '60s". Little wonder that Wood commented, "working in comics is like sentencing yourself to a life of hard labour in solitary confinement". A stroke in 1978 resulting in the loss of vision in one eye could only have been a devastating blow to Wally; towards the end he was described by a friend as "reduced to squalid personal circumstances." All this for the man who is often regarded as one of the greatest comics artists of all time.

Remind yourself of the good Wood, at the Wally Wood Cover Gallery on *http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~rdgarr/00Galleries/wood-gallery/ww-gal.html* where there are two pages of fine Wood covers. For $1000 you can get a Wood-inked page (over Don Heck pencils) from Avengers #21 at *www.artguy.safeshopper.com/1/27.htm?116*. It's the mega-brill page 14 from that unforgettable fan favourite.

A site proclaiming itself as "Unreal-X-:Wally Wood Comics and Art", of which I'll spare you the address, promised some of Wood's, ahem, more adult material, such as Naughty Knotty Woody. My first attempt to access this came up with a "No image displayed" message, for which I should perhaps be grateful. The second go (all right, I was curious) promised me the "hottest amateurs on the net", and no, they weren't referring to would be Marvel pencillers. Even accessing it brought me increased email spam of the type that tries to make you feel inadequate in the trouser department and offers "miracle" results that will "enhance her pleasure". Thankfully my PC won't be going to PC World when it needs fixing.

DON'T YOU THINK YOU'RE BEING UNNECESSARILY HARD ON CANNON MAY? I UNDERSTAND HE'S THE BEST AGENT—
YOUR CONCERN FOR HIM IS VERY TOUCHING, DEAR. ARE YOU SURE YOU TOLD ME THE TRUTH ABOUT HIM? I CAN'T VERY WELL DISMISS HIM HE WASN'T GIVEN ME A GOOD EXCUSE YET.
BUT I'M GOING TO GIVE HIM EVERY DIRTY DETAIL I CAN THINK OF UNTIL HE RESIGNS!
A FEW DAYS LATER
H-JOHN! HOW'S THE ELECTRONIC SURVEILLANCE BUSINESS?
OH, HELLO, FINN. IT'S KIND OF UNPLEASANT AND DULL! WE'RE A PRETTY SQUARE BUNCH! BUT MAY IS RIGHT SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT.

In 1973 Wood appeared in his own sexy, cynical strip Cannon, as Finn O'Hara

While we're on the weird, "The Embedded Internet – The Final Evolution", available from *www.armaggedonbooks.com*, is by one W. Wood who describes "How the antichrist will use technology to rule the world...via the Internet". Now, apart from revealing my very own secret plan for world domination, I rather suspect that as it was written in 2000 a rather different W. Wood authored this masterpiece. You'll be thrilled to know that it is still "in stock".

A gorgeous science fiction composition from EC's Weird Science-Fantasy #23 (1954)

Surprise. But there's some of Wood's work on those fun Ugly stickers from 1966, at *http://www.horrorcards.org/uglystickers.html*, which of course reminded me of the craze for stuff like *Mars Attacks!* cards from the same era. A certain Wally Wood was involved here also. So I was a fan even before I discovered comics.

Yahoo! are at it again with "The Wally Wood Mailing List" on *www.yahoo.com/group/wood-l*, which has 190-plus members who left 242 messages in September. Me, I make no secret of my Yahoo hatred, especially as they were keen to tell me (with eye-burning regularity) that "your computer is under attack". Quite. And of course, with the (apparently stalled) revival of Thunder Agents, take time to reacquaint yourself with Wood's excellent work on the Tower Comics series of the 60s on *www.thunderagents.com*.

There is plenty more Wood out there to enjoy, but I'll sign off with another Wood Gallery on *http://psychosaurus.com/plain/woodindex.html*, which abounds with lots of lovely illos from the late, great, and patently not forgotten Wallace Wood. The tragedy of the man reminds us that our comic book creators are only too human.

MAD ABOUT MAX (& SAM)

IT'S been years since Steve Purcell's Sam & Max bestrode the comics world like a comedy colossus. We asked Borderline's most expendable writer, Steve Miller, to see what he could find out. Here is his report.

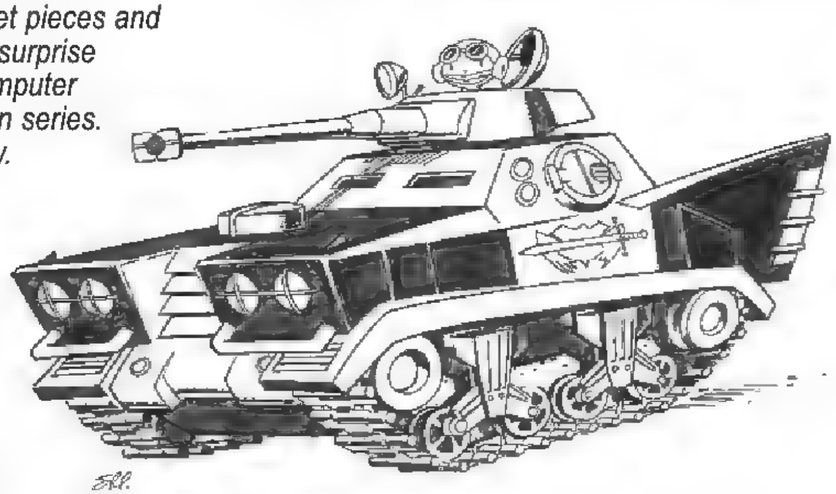
SAM, MAX & STEVE PURCELL INTERVIEWED

I'M standing outside a tenement building in New York. The rain slapping into the back of my neck stings like a squadron of angry bees besieging my barber rash. Whenever I look up at the building, the rain falls from the brow of my cap into my eyes. Mummy. I'm not crying, honestly. I'm here because I'm looking for Steve Purcell. Back in the late eighties / early nineties, Purcell's Sam & Max: Freelance Police was the funniest damn thing in comic books. Its infrequent appearances always rattled with manic sociopathic humour, ludicrous set pieces and some great slapstick. It was no surprise when it was turned into a hit computer game, and a subsequent cartoon series. But it all seems so long ago now. Apart from a one page appearance in an issue of Oni Double Feature, we've not heard from Sam & Max in five years.

The door to the building isn't locked, and though the hallway smells of old root beer, it's still drier than outside so I edge in. According to the address board, the people I'm looking for are on the second floor, so I make my way up the stairs – unchallenged. I can hear the sounds of violence coming from the first office, and, knowing what I do about "Flint Paper: Private Investigator", I don't hang about there for too long. The writing on the next door reads "Sam & Max: Freelance Police." I take a deep breath and push the door open.

It's bad. They're both here, throwing darts at a dartboard that has a photo of George Bush pasted over it. At least, I think it's George Bush. There's not a lot of the picture left so it's difficult to tell. And they're not taking turns; it's an arrows free-for-all. God forbid anybody should get in the way.

They both look at me when I enter the room. I blabber on about how I'm looking for Purcell, and can they give me an interview, but they just look at me some more. Max is baring his teeth. I explain that I have lots of money and that doesn't seem to work. Lastly, I offer them a bag containing the finest junk food that England has to offer, milk chocolate that isn't milk chocolate,



POOM
POOM
POOM
HEY! CUT IT OUT!
IT'S LIKE MY GRANDMA USED TO SAY WHEN SHE WAS ELECTROCUTING PRISONERS. MAX: "CRIME IS AN INVITATION TO THE CRYPT."
LOOK AT THEM SCURRY LIKE PUPPIES FROM BATHWATER.

jelly tots, and chocolate eggs containing small voodoo dolls of football players. They're mollified. At least, Sam seems cool. Max is stuffing his face with the food.

Max, you're not supposed to eat the footballer dolls, little buddy.

Borderline: It's been five years since we last heard from the two of you. Where have you been?
Sam: We're out there. Defending soft, pasty punks like you from the gun toting, proudly ignorant rabble. Knuckle-dragging troglodytes who would just as soon peel you like a grape as give you a howda-ya-doo.
Max: Soft, pasty punks?
Sam: Did I start this off on the wrong foot?

BL: Did the TV show mean that people recognised you more, and did it affect your ability to function as Freelance Police?
Sam: Did you see who they got to play us? My guy's nose was enormous. He was always waving his arms. Waving his arms.
Max: I liked mine. He brought sensitivity and layers of meaning to my persona.
Sam: In real life you're only one layer - mostly chicken skin.

BL: I heard rumours that the two of you were either a) living in tax exile on a luxury resort in the Cayman Islands, or b) had blown all of your TV money on a failed dot-com venture. Care to comment on either of these rumours?
Max: What's tax?
Sam: Shhhhhh! ...The dot-com world is decades ahead of the general public. We're like termites trying to make sense of the atom. Crude, streaming animation displayed in a tiny window is the next generation of entertainment for the people of tomorrow. I have seen the future and it is called *www.doodie.com*!

BL: What part of your job (Freelance Police) gives you the most satisfaction, makes you tingle to the tips of your fuzzy paws?
Sam: I like kicking doors in. Sometimes a surprised naked person scurries past. Always embarrassingly entertaining.
Max: I like when they beg right before the indian burn.

BL: And what part of your job is most likely to make you mad?
Max: One perp got a shiv into me as I was throttling the living bejeezus out of him. I hate that.
Sam: The last thing that feisty little rascal saw was Max's tonsils.

BL: Lastly, to Max, just where do you keep your gun?
Max: Bring me a fluoroscope and a set of taxidermy blades and I'll put on a horror show that will curl your eyebrows.
Sam: Ooh, yeah. Don't ask that. He means it.

I'm horrified by the vision this description grants me. Plus, I'm a little worried that Max might turn on me when he realises there's no chocolate left. So I thank them for their hospitality and lurch out of the

building, clutching my stomach and trying desperately to think nice thoughts. Jennifer Aniston's hair, cute little kittens making daisy chains, that sort of thing.

Still, fun interlude though that was, I still have no idea how I'm going to find Purcell. For starters, I have no idea where he might be. Or what he looks like. It looks like my only option will be to make something up. Deciding that I need some time to think this through, I'm distracted by the neon glow of the Stuckeys at the end of the street, and am easily drawn in by its siren lure of pancakes, free coffee refills and really comfy vinyl seating.

Once my eyes get accustomed to the faded '60s glamour inside, I realise there is only one other customer. He's sitting at the bar. He's arguing with the waitress about getting an extra egg on his all day breakfast. I then realise that, in a nod to convenient visual shorthand, he's wearing a self-adhesive name badge, and it says "Steve Purcell".

Talk about lucky. I explain to him where I've come from and that I'd really like to ask him some questions about Sam & Max. He looks unsure but I offer to buy him the extra egg, and he's all smiles and happy go lucky Californian charm.

BL: Where have you been and what have you been doing for the last 5 years?
Steve Purcell: I'm out there, defending soft and pasty punks... no, wait. Actually, I've stayed pretty busy doing a bunch of freelance concept and writing work. I went to Industrial Light and Magic to work in the story department on the ill-fated *Frankenstein* digital feature. While it lasted it was a lot of fun and when it ended I continued working with them developing ideas for feature films, until about a year ago. Since then I've been working at Pixar in the story department for John Lassiter's next feature, *Cars*. Recently LucasArts announced the sequel to *Sam & Max Hit the Road* and so I've started working with Mike Stemmle (from the original game) on that project as well.

BL: Some of our readers might not be aware of the general history behind Sam & Max. Could you do a quick Readers Digest Condensed version for them?
SP: They started when I was a kid. My little brother Dave and I were drawing our own cheesy comics. He drew the first Sam & Max comics and would leave them around the house unfinished. I would find them and draw the rest of the stories in a mean parody of his style, right down to the dialog. That's where Sam & Max's self-referencing way of speaking began.

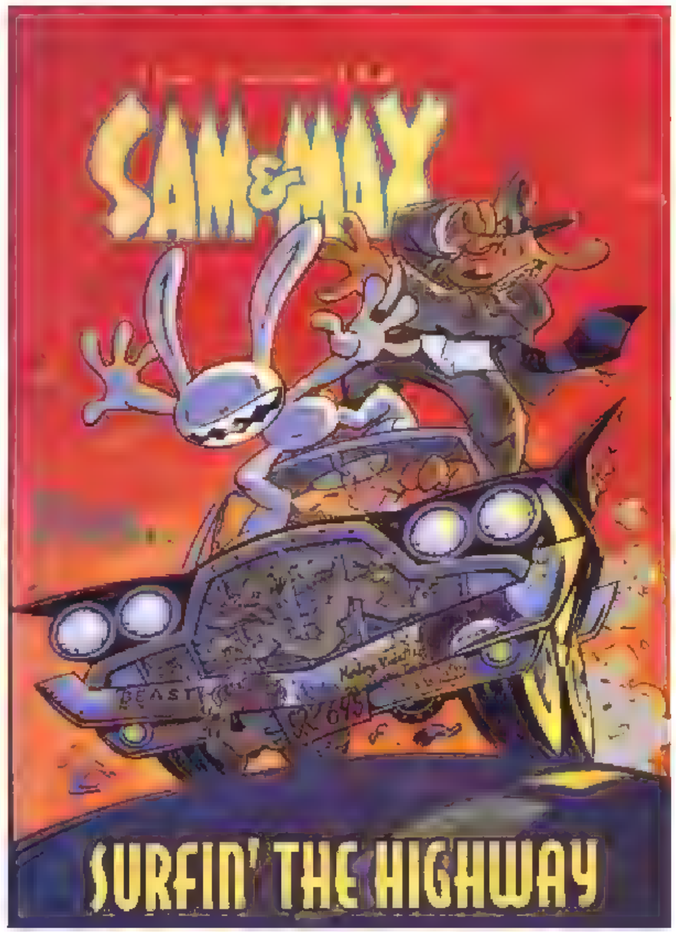
After a while I would do my own stories. Dave didn't care about the characters and gave them to me for my birthday. Years later I did a series of Sam & Max strips in the Art School newspaper. They weren't very good, and were always drawn at the last minute before deadline.

A few more years down the road, in the late 80s, Steve Moncuse - who was having good fortune self-publishing his own comic Fish Police - asked if I wanted him to publish a Sam & Max book. I spent four months drawing it and it came out to a positive reception. While I was working on the second one I was hired by LucasArts to animate onscreen and create package illustrations for their computer games. Sam & Max became sort of known around the company. When LucasArts wanted a comic strip for their fan magazine they hired me to do a series of color "Sunday" strips that would parody their latest game release.

In 1993 LucasArts licensed Sam & Max for a game of their own. It was produced in less than a year and made *Entertainment Weekly*'s top ten list. A couple more years and *Sam & Max* was optioned for a TV series. It was on for one season on FoxKids, won a Canadian Emmy award for best animated series and was a Top Ten rated kids' show for the season.

Now their latest hiatus is over and Sam & Max are going to be in a new LucasArts game.

BL: And could we have some brief biographical detail: where you grew up, where you live now, how many inches of rainfall you get per year, whether you have a particular message for the teacher in fifth grade who said you would never get anywhere?
SP: I was born on the East Coast, road-tripped to California with the family when I was about eight years old and grew up here. I graduated from an old art school in Oakland and lived in that town for about ten years starting out my freelance illustration



career doing painted covers for primitive computer games. I now live in a little Victorian town north of San Francisco called Petaluma (where George Lucas filmed *American Graffiti*). I have a wife and two boys and live in an old, old house. We get just enough rain and as for my fifth grade teacher, she actually liked me. However, my sixth grade teacher, Miss Taylor, didn't think I would amount to much. My message to her? Cheer up!

BL: Even though it's been so long since any big Sam & Max activity, the characters still retain a lot of affection from fans, as can be seen from the various internet sites. Does this surprise you?
SP: It does surprise me and it's great. I always appreciate the effort that goes into that stuff. I get emails from people who tell me they saw the TV show in Guatemala or something. Or people sending pieces of art that they did. I actually think it's amazing that there's any lingering interest at all.

BL: You said you're working at Pixar. Are you allowed to expand on this and tell us more about what you are doing, and if we watch the credits of Monsters Inc. *really slowly, are you in there anywhere?*
SP: I pretty much said all I can say about the new project, *Cars*, except that it's coming out in 2005. I had just started as *Monsters Inc.* was coming out so I had nothing to do with it except soaking up all the good will from everyone else's years of hard work on it.

BL: The two major adaptations of Sam & Max, the video game and the TV show, were both very faithful to the characters and didn't really change anything major. Is this because you managed to retain much control on both of the projects, or do you think it's because the characters are so well realised that there's not a lot that needed changing?
SP: I think it helps if something exists previously as a guideline for developing something new. That didn't stop FoxKids from asking early on in my talks with them if Max could be a girl. I never had "control" but maintained a lot of involvement in both projects, which seemed to be appreciated.

BL: In one of the issues (the Comico, one I think) you advocated a line of Sam & Max plush toys (women love plush toys). Are you sad that these never appeared? Was there ever a possibility? And is there anything else that you would have liked to see during the great Sam & Max boom of the mid '90s? Action figures, perhaps?
SP: Some of that stuff might actually have a chance to happen with the new game down the road. When I wrote that editorial, toys were still a mass-market proposition. If the TV show had another season there was a major toy company ready to jump in. Now there are toys of almost everything in tiny editions of a few thousand, but really nice stuff. I'll definitely be taking another look at making that happen.

BL: I know that you were friends with Mike Mignola and Art Adams. Do you still keep up with their comics, and are there any other comics that you still read?
SP: I met Mike in art school - he was reading my cheesy strips before we actually met, and we had a teacher in common who would tell each of us about the other one. Mike's stuff was always very professional and design-oriented. Much more so than most students' stuff would be. He always knew he wanted to do comics and once he started (the year we graduated) he never stopped. There's a very clear progression you can track from his early stuff to now. He's working on a movie of Hellboy and I don't know anyone that's worked harder or deserves it more. I still follow his stuff and it continues to amaze me. Arthur's stuff I always appreciated as well but he works on a lot of different kinds of things so I don't run across his work as much. I try to catch up if I see him at a convention. As for other comics, I don't follow too many. I still like Jim Woodring and just started checking out some Dave Cooper. I prefer that weirder stuff.

BL: Is there any Sam & Max in the pipeline, or do you have any other comics stuff in the works? I've got three firm orders over in the UK if that's any help.
SP: I have this book that's about a third drawn and inked. I know what I have to do to finish it and it's mostly just setting the time aside and seeing it through. It seems more likely to happen with the momentum of the game but I've learned to stop promising it by a certain date because I tend to disappoint. I have another epic scale adventure I'd like to do as well; Sam & Max Plunge Through Space. It was the story that I based my action game pitch on and would be about 60 pages or so. Maybe if I start tonight...

BL: None of the companies that previously published Sam & Max appear to exist any longer (Fishwrap, Comico, Epic, Marlowe). Are you gunning for one of the big companies next, and conversely, do you think that perhaps a big company might shy away from the property because they fear the curse?
SP: Yeah, you're probably right. I'm lucky that I have supreme control of such vast powers to destroy these foolish publishers. Come and publish me DC! Dark Horse! If you've got the belly for it!!

BL: Is there any chance that there might be a reissue of the trade paperback from another publisher? In colour this time!?
SP: I'd like to do it and I'd like to paint all the pages too. I started selling some of my original pages and regretting it (because there are not that many and I got sort of attached to them). Then I came up with the brilliant plan that I could take my copies, print them on bristol board, paint them and then I'd have original pages again. Of course there's that publisher's curse thing, so it probably will never happen.

BL: Is there anything in particular that helps you to kick back? Any particular music, television, beer, a baseball team?

SP: I like soundtracks by Carter Goodrich and Thomas Newman. I love Aimee Mann and Coldplay and Johnny Cash. If I work in my studio late at night I like having all the horrible dating shows playing in the background. They remind me to appreciate being married.

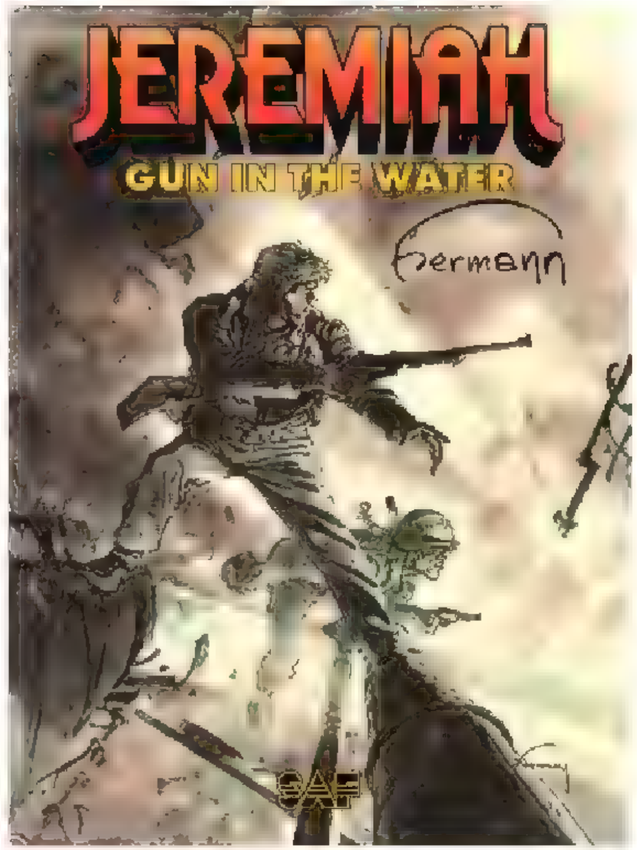
BL: Do you have any children? And are they big fans of the characters? Or would they be scared, as Max's terrifying head is a universal symbol of something or other?
SP: Russell is three and Ian is one. Ian's too little to ask but Russell watches the cartoons and has some kind of concept that I'm connected to them. "I like your *Sam & Max* shows, Dad." He's not afraid of too much and rode on the Disneyland Haunted Mansion with me. That's my boy!

BL: Do you have a favourite moment from any of the Sam & Max stories? For me, it's probably some of the throwaway gags, like when they're walking up the stairs, Max says, "The guys probably wonder where I get my good looks", and Sam says quietly "From a shark?" That cracks me up every time I look at it.
SP: I always like the obscure jokes that I put in for myself, especially if I think they're just for me but somebody else got them too. I like the songs because I'm always sort of reaching when I make up a song. They all have music and can actually be sung. I like the jokes that connect to my childhood memories like the road trip stuff. One of my favorite moments that still makes me smile is when Sam is trying to restore Max to his skin in *Bad Day on the Moon*; Sam says, "Max doesn't have DNA. I think he's considered a mineral."

I've got a heap of questions left to ask, but our waitress, Betty, returns with the breakfast for Steve, and I think it's probably time to stop. I've got the interview I came for, and there's at least one scoop in there. It's just a shame that I can't lose the vision of where Max keeps his gun. Feh.

HUPPEN AT 'EM!

Hot on the heels of the news that the Showtime Network has green-lit a second season of Jeremiah *comes the American publication of Jeremiah: Gun In The Water, by Belgian master Hermann Huppen, creator of Les Tours de Bois-Maury. Jay Eales spoke to Dark Horse Comics' Chris Warner about it...*



APPEARING under Dark Horse's Venture imprint, in association with Ervin Rustemagic's Strip Art Features, **Jeremiah: Gun In The Water** reprints the 22nd volume of Hermann Huppen's **Jeremiah** saga in an English language edition. **Jeremiah**'s core audience is mostly to be found in France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Italy.

This is the latest attempt to bring Jeremiah's graphic adventures to an Anglophone audience, after previous attempts by Adventure Comics and Fantagraphics. Adventure Comics put out a trilogy of 2 issue black and white miniseries derived from the first three **Jeremiah** books, renamed **Jeremiah: Birds Of Prey**, **A Fistful Of Sand**, and **The Heirs**. Fantagraphics produced collections of the first two books in 1982/83, renamed **The Survivors**, with the subtitles *Talons of Blood* and *The Bitter Taste Of Sand*. My research revealed that Catalan Communications published an English language edition of the 13th **Jeremiah** book, **Strike**, in 1990.

Jeremiah's Anglophone profile is currently higher than it has ever been, thanks to the Showtime television series loosely adapted from the material by *Babylon 5*'s J. Michael Straczynski, whose own current comics work includes **Rising Stars** for Top Cow, and **Amazing Spider-Man** and the just announced **Squadron Supreme** for Marvel.

The television series has little in common with Hermann's version, save that it is set in a post-apocalyptic America, with civilisation attempting to either hang on to the past or to build a new future. In Hermann's original vision, the world became the way it is because of a war between white and black power blocs, resulting in a nuclear holocaust setting things back 300 years. The hook for Straczynski's revision is that a virus wipes out all the adults, leaving the children to grow up without role models to guide them. The two main protagonists, Jeremiah and Kurdy, are fundamentally the same in both incarnations, with Jeremiah (played by Luke Perry in the TV version) as the idealistic, almost naïve man of honour, trying to make things better, while Kurdy (played by *The Cosby Show*'s Malcolm Jamal Warner) remains a cynical self-obsessed pragmatist, though the two influence each other as they travel. Some fans of the comic strip were disappointed to find Kurdy without his trademark helmet and necklace inscribed 'mother'. The details may

Hermann Huppen enjoys a game of ping pong in 1993

vary wildly, but both versions of the saga are very much concerned with the ways in which societies behave: the need for people to seek out their own, and band together against those who are not like them, or that the mistakes of the past continue to be made again and again – and that the cardinal rule is "survival of the fittest".

It has been said that George Miller's *Mad Max* films took a lot of inspiration from **Jeremiah**. During the making of the first in the trilogy, Miller was getting copies of **Zack**, the German comic which was serialising *Jeremiah* at the time, sent over to him. Certainly, the backing of a network like Showtime has helped the TV show immensely, allowing it more leeway to portray a brutal realistic future, along broadly similar lines to its comic book antecedent, although it does limit the potential audience it will attract. With luck, the television series will continue to tell interesting tales throughout its second season, and will continue to shine a light on Hermann's work for those who have yet to discover it.

I asked Chris Warner if the TV series had influenced Dark Horse's decision to publish the book: "We've been publishing Hermann titles for several years (**Blood Ties**, **Rodrigo**, **The Towers of Bois Maury**)," he replied, "and this was the first **Jeremiah** title we had the opportunity to publish. Hermann is one of the world's true masters of graphic fiction, and we would never pass up the chance to publish his work. The show is a bit of icing on the cake, but we would have snapped up the chance to publish **Gun in the Water** regardless."

The Venture line of titles is co-published with SAF [Strip Art Features] as part of a multiple-edition publishing program, only differing from version to version in translation and cover design.

Given that Dark Horse are beginning with the 22nd volume of Jeremiah's adventures, I asked Warner if there was to be any kind of "story so far" introduction to the book, in order to bring readers up to speed: "No. To be honest, I don't think you need one. If you read the back cover blurb, you have all the information you need to make the story work. Hermann's writing is very universal and accessible, and the stories are self-contained."

As to the possibility of Dark Horse issuing translated editions of the earlier volumes, Warner commented: "We'd love to, although publishing them is contingent on SAF's publishing schedule. These are not high-selling titles in America, and graphic albums are very expensive to produce, and so we need to tag on with a larger multi-country press run to keep the books affordable."

JEREMIAH ADVENTURES

AFTER serialisation in such titles as Super As, Spirou, Métal Hurlant and Zack, Jeremiah has been published in a long-running series of European hardback albums, as follows:

1) La Nuit Des Rapaces [*The Night Of The Raptors*] 1979 EDI-3
2) Du Sable Plein Les Dents [*Teeth Full Of Sand*] 1979 EDI-3
3) Les Héritiers Sauvages [*The Savage Heirs*] 1980 EDI-3
4) Les Yeux De Fer Rouge [*Eyes Of Red Iron*] 1980 EDI-3
5) Un Cobaye Pour l'Éternité [*A Guinea-Pig For All Time*] 1981 Novedi
6) La Secte [*The Sect*] Feb 1982 Novedi
7) Afromerica [*Afromerica*] Sep1982 Novedi
8) Les Eaux De Colére [*Waters Of Anger*] April 1983 Novedi
9) In Hiver De Clown [*Clown's Winter*] Nov 1983 Novedi
10) Boomerang [*Boomerang*] Oct 1984 Novedi
11) Delta [*Delta*] Oct 1985 Novedi
12) Julius Et Romea [*Julius And Romea*] Oct 1986 Novedi
13) Strike [*Strike*] May 1988 Dupuis
14) Simon Est De Retour [*Simon Is Back*] Sep 1989 Dupuis
15) Alex [*Alex*] Sep 1990 Dupuis
16) La Ligne Rouge [*The Red Line*] Oct 1992 Dupuis
17) Trois Motos... Ou Quatre [*Three Motorbikes... Or Four*] Feb 1994 Dupuis
18) Ave Caesar [*Ave Caesar*] May 1995 Dupuis
19) Zone Frontière [*Frontier Zone*] April 1996 Dupuis
20) Mercenaires [*Mercenaries*] Sep 1997 Dupuis
21) Le Cousin Lindford [*The Lindford Cousin*] Oct 1998 Dupuis
22) Le Fusil Dans l'Eau [*Gun In The Water*] Mar 2001 Dupuis
23) Qui Est Renard Bleu? [*Who Is Blue Fox?*] Mar 2002 Dupuis

For more information about Hermann Huppen visit:

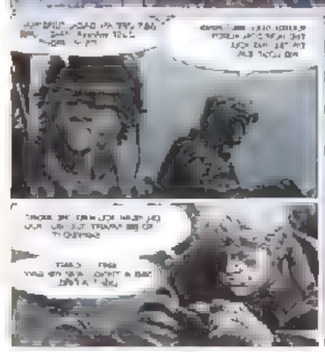
HERMANN HUPPEN – BIOGRAPHY

BORN in Bévérce, Belgium on July 17th 1938, Hermann Huppen attended the St. Gilles Art Academy in Brussels before embarking on a career in interior decoration; then a friend, Philippe Vandooren (later to become editor in chief of Spirou weekly), convinced him to try drawing comics. He produced a short strip for a scouting magazine, which was spotted by Greg, one of the most prolific Franco-Belgian writer/artists of the 60s. Greg employed Hermann in his studio, where he drew strips for Spirou, and his first series (in collaboration with Greg), *Bernard Prince*, for Tintin Magazine. *Bernard Prince* concerned three freebooting adventurers sailing the world, and was one of the keystones in establishing Hermann's reputation as one of the top "realist" artists on the Franco-Belgian scene.

Other series followed, most importantly *Comanche* - the only European Western strip to seriously rival Charlier and Giraud's *Lieutenant Blueberry* - written by Greg and published in Tintin between 1969 and 1979. After that Hermann quit Tintin Magazine and set up an arrangement with German publisher Koralle, devising Jeremiah for them. Jeremiah first appeared in German, and only appeared in French when it was later serialised by Metal Hurlant. Around this time, Hermann's work could also be seen in a number of humorous short strips for Spirou, written by his old friend Vandooren.

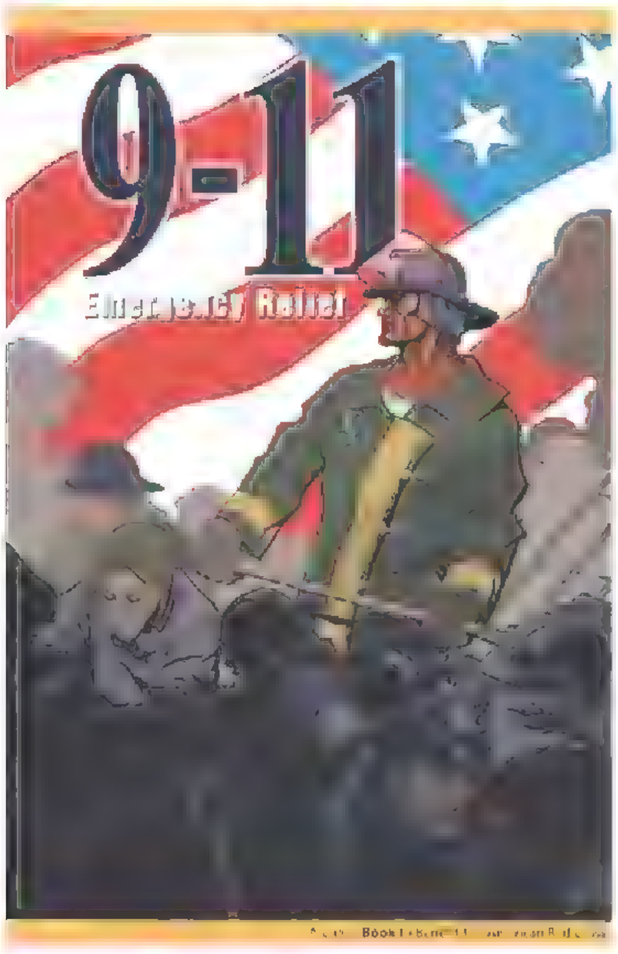
In 1984, Hermann started on the mediaeval adventure series Les Tours de Bois-Maury for the Strip Art Features agency. The first two volumes were among the best known of his works in England and America prior to the *Jeremiah* television series, thanks to translated editions published by Titan Books in the late '80s. Since then, Dark Horse have published new editions of Towers to much acclaim.

Above: portrait from 1997; to the right a selection of Hermann images.



TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg – Borderline's US correspondent – looks at the busy month of November...



HERE in the United States, November means Thanksgiving is on the way. It's a very family-oriented, middle-America kind of holiday - something about the Mayflower, Miles Standish, maize, and laying the groundwork for tricking the indigenous population out of their native land... but let's not get bogged down in minor details right now. It's also the month when many American columnists, wracking their brains for something to write about, fall back on a tried and true national tradition - making a list of things to be thankful for as we approach the season of giving and spiritual harmony. Thanksgiving is, after all, the gateway to the Christmas/Chanukah/New Year troika, so let's indulge my threadbare patriotic sensibilities and make a list: what *do* we have to be thankful for in the US comicbook industry this year?

Comic Book Globalization - For too many years, American comicbooks have existed under the iron rule of ignorance, but thanks to the Internet, the expanding market of eBay and other auction sites, and cross-cultural creators from the UK, Europe, and Japan, comics in the States are beginning to show signs of emerging into a new era of acceptance and intellectual appreciation. Japanese and European styles of comicbook storytelling in particular have started to influence our comics like never before, the mainstream media here have begun to realize that there may be just a bit more to the medium than spandex, and lots of fun comicbook movies are taking theaters by storm... and Cyclops... and Rogue... sorry, I'll stop now.

Patriotic Reinvestment - True, there has been a disturbing downside to the reinvigoration of American patriotism in all media since 9/11, but in comics at least, most of the sympathetic outpouring has been inspiring. While some wonder just where the proceeds for some of the many 9/11 benefit comics have actually gone, there's no denying that, across the nation and abroad, writers and artists pulled together as a unified industry and produced some wonderful work that captured the many turbulent emotions sweeping through our devastated nation over the last year. Where better than the comicbook - arguably an American invention in its most familiar physical format - to express those emotions and explore the effect of the tragedy on our lives?

The Story and Characters Come First - The '90s were a bleak period indeed for anyone who valued the comicbook as literature. With all those variant chrome covers, flashy holograms, garish coloring and design, and endless splash pages of grimacing mutations slugging each other, the comics of the last ten years were mired in flash over substance. In the last two years or so, however, the industry seems to have rediscovered that if you write it well, they will come (to paraphrase a lesson learned in *Field of Dreams*, a movie about the supposed Great American Pastime known as baseball). Strong writing and clever characterization have sustained everything from the latest Will Eisner projects to series like Terry Moore's **Strangers in Paradise** to Brian Michael Bendis' hard-edged take on superhero noir, **Powers**, to - heavens! - superhero fare like **Ultimate Spider-Man**, written by...yes, Bendis again. With luck the trend will continue, and Bendis will eventually write every comic published in the continental United States. Give the guy some more caffeine.

The Death of Variant Covers Etc. - As a parallel observation to the above, I've noticed a significant diminishing of the variant cover gimmick. As American publishers begin to focus once more on the content of their comics rather than their wrapping, we've seen the rampant release of multiple covers for the same comic dwindling ever closer to non-existence. Sure, there will always be a variant cover or two - **Vampirella** comes to mind as one series that continues to adhere rigidly to the practice - but for the most part, the big boys like Marvel and DC have shied away from the strategy on projects that would have demanded it in the past, such as Marvel's **Origin** miniseries or perhaps DC's relaunch of **Aquaman**. OK, so **Aquaman** would *never* have rated a variant cover, but you know what I mean.

Comics in Bookstores - Thanks to the ever-growing popularity of trade paperback collections and the application of the format by just about every major comicbook publisher, bookstores now have more reason to stock plenty of comic-based literature in their stores. Chain stores like Borders, Barnes & Noble and even mall-bound shops like Waldenbooks have taken to devoting entire shelf sections to comic book material, from superhero fare to graphic novels like **Maus**, and even manga collections. What next, genuine acceptance in the academic community? Nah!

Spider-Man - I'm a Spider-fan from way back, so let me just indulge for one moment and say I'm thankful that at long last I got to watch Spidey on the big screen. Thank you, Sam Raimi and everyone else involved in this exciting big budget production! Roll on *Spider-Man 2*! "Spider-Man, Spider-Man, does whatever a spider can..."

*Arnold is co-author and designer of **Howe's Transcendental Toybox**, the first-ever comprehensive guide to Doctor Who collectibles (www.tardis.tv). He is Editor of **The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide**. He is also Senior Editor of **Cinescape** (www.cinescape.com). Arnold is also thankful for a chance to rant and rave all the way across the Atlantic once a month.*

He can be pestered at the14thdoctor@yahoo.com.

Internet kills the Entertainment Industry 2

Ande Morgensen attempts to show us even more darkness before the dawn and talks porn...

LAST issue I talked about how the Entertainment industry could become a thing of the past in not too many years. I cited a number of factors, but since then I've had a few other really horrifying concepts thrown at me (thanks to **Borderline** proof-reader Colin Theobald), which I intend to share with you.

PVRs - Personal Video Recorders, or TiVo as it used to be called. This particular piece of equipment means that the concept of television advertising gets thrown out with the baby and the bath water. With a PVR you can skip adverts, you can play "live" TV scenes again and again. You are no longer aligned to TV stations, you are aligned to specific TV shows and you can choose when you watch them rather than allowing them to tell you. It's the ultimate freedom in entertainment and effectively it has made digital = death.

To emphasise a point - no advertising revenue from consumers doesn't just mean no favourite programs, it means no programs at all! How can production companies make anything when there's a chance that it won't actually make any money for anyone? The BBC operates a license fee for its UK viewers, but that contribution only accounts for a percentage of the overall funding the BBC needs – even it relies on some forms of advertising. And in many countries there is only commercial TV…

The entertainment industry is in danger of becoming a 20th Century phenomenon.

A new CD from Coldplay, or Michael Jackson, or Enrique Iglesias could soon just be an advert for the impending large concerts – these artists' only way of actually making money. One day, the artist won't expect to make his money from millions of record sales, but will make it from extortionate gig prices throughout their world tours.

Except, Fred Bloggs is sitting in the audience with his digital Walkman, or his digital camera and within a day the entire concert is available in digital stereo from your favourite peer-to-peer site. Yeah, it isn't as good as seeing the real thing, but it's a damned sight cheaper than seeing the real thing.

It's a nightmare and it's almost impossible to police.

What is the only division of the entertainment industry that has made any form of profit from the Internet? The porn industry, that's what. It is run as an amazingly tight ship. It is, on the whole, self-governing. It polices itself pretty effectively. It has R&Ded, then championed, mega-successful micropayments systems, which don't appear to be available or accessible to any site that isn't porn-oriented. It appreciates that it has to stay within the (loose) guidelines of moral decency - so you never see under-18-year-old models on legitimate sites - and it treats purveyors of paedophile material with the contempt they deserve. It even goes as far as possible to prevent pirates and illegal operators from flaunting its own self-imposed rules.

And despite any moral objections, people looking at sexual pictures of men and/or women has been a popular, if behind closed doors, occupation for as long as men and women have known the difference between each other. In fact, the moral objections are responsible for the success the porn industry has had in charging for its online productions; adults want porn, but adults also wish to ensure that porn is not freely available to kids, so credit card payment is not only profitable, it ensures a maintenance of moral standards… and so it is acceptable to Internet users.

The problem is that for the proper entertainment industry to follow the porn industry, it will need to invest huge amounts of money – and perhaps find a way to persuade society at large that charging is desirable. No-one likes investing money really, especially when profits are down and people are being laid off. And persuading people that paying for entertainment is *good* for them is a tricky proposition!

So movies are going to die. The music industry is going to struggle to make a profit while pirating is on the increase. Television is going to be full of 20 year-old repeats - *all the time* - by the end of the second decade of the 21st century. Entertainment is heading for a huge revolution, because the technology has advanced so quickly it is difficult to come up with effective blocks that the pirate can't already hack his way into. And, frankly, that is going to be the norm from now on.

Yet despite all these warnings, sections of the entertainment industry that should be benefiting from this potentially catastrophic crisis are still struggling. Book publishing revenue is down by about 7% worldwide, and that is a medium that will still remain more difficult to pirate than any digital medium. Comics' sales across the world have actually increased in some countries, but have dropped considerably in other, far more commercially important, countries. Japan, the home of the comic and the computer game that allows you to be a comicbook styled hero, has seen a drop in sales revenue over the last five years. It just keeps going down and no one is forecasting an upturn in fortunes.

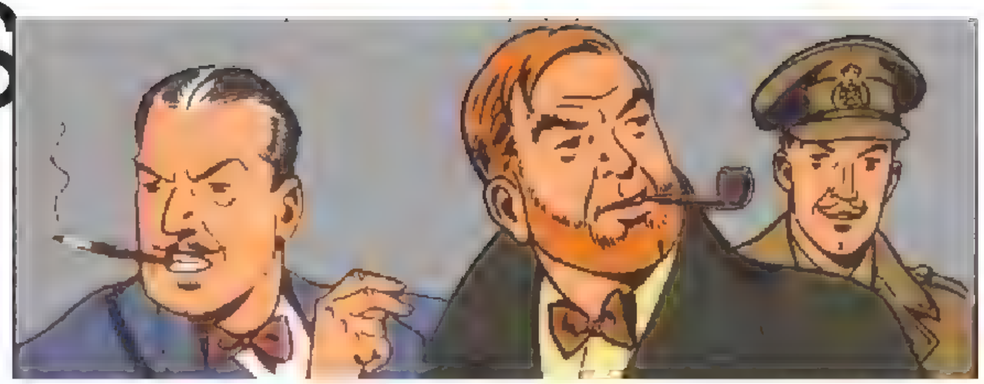
Comics have the chance to remain an important part of the entertainment industry, albeit in an even more marginalized way. But for them to re-establish themselves as a force in entertainment, the publishers have to renegotiate the way they do business with creators, because at the moment there are far too few being paid too much money - and far too many who are not getting anything, but are capable of doing as much for the industry as the ones that command the high rates.

Next issue I'll conclude this examination with how I think the comics industry can not only survive the 21st Century, but also thrive in it.

A tame example of what you pay for on porn sites!

CONTINENTAL MILESTONES

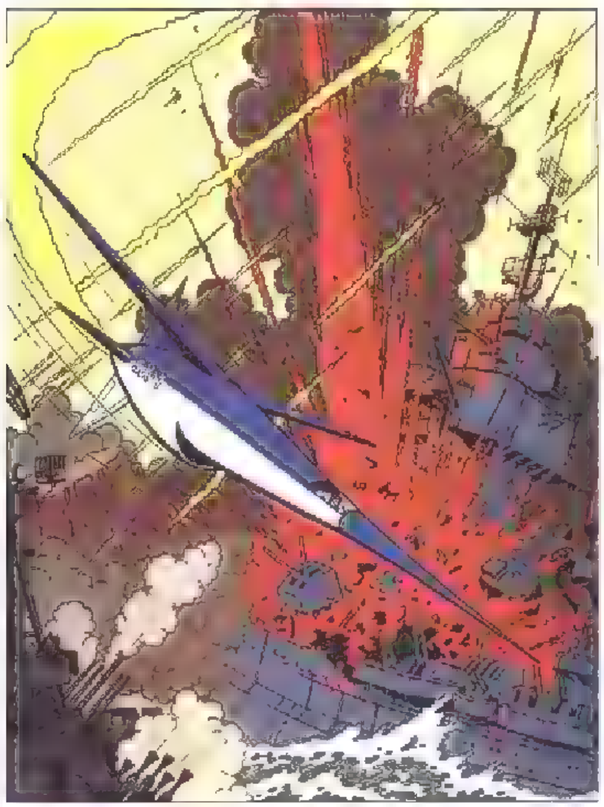
While Kevin Schomburg takes a break, Mike Kidson switches from his usual historical preoccupations to take a look at a few classic series from the European mainstream. We'll think of a better title for the result next month...



BLAKE ET MORTIMER

BETWEEN 1946 and his death in 1987, the Belgian author Edgar P. Jacobs produced just eight stories about the adventures of Colonel Francis Percy Blake and Professor Philip Edgar Angus Mortimer; 12 albums in total, the last of them only existing at script stage when Jacobs died. It's hardly a massive output - yet it's firmly established as one of the most famous and enduring of all Franco-Belgian comics series.

Jacobs was a latecomer to comics. Born in 1904, he pursued a dual career as a designer/illustrator and as a cabaret and light opera musician until 1940, when he left the stage and began to contribute illustrations and cartoons to the Brussels journal *Bravo!*. In 1942 he got the job of drawing a Belgian edition of **Flash Gordon** after the supply of Alex Raymond originals in occupied Belgium ran out – but only a few weeks later the Nazi censors prohibited the series. An idea of Jacobs' approach may still be discerned in his first original comics album, the SF non-series piece **Le Rayon U** (1943).



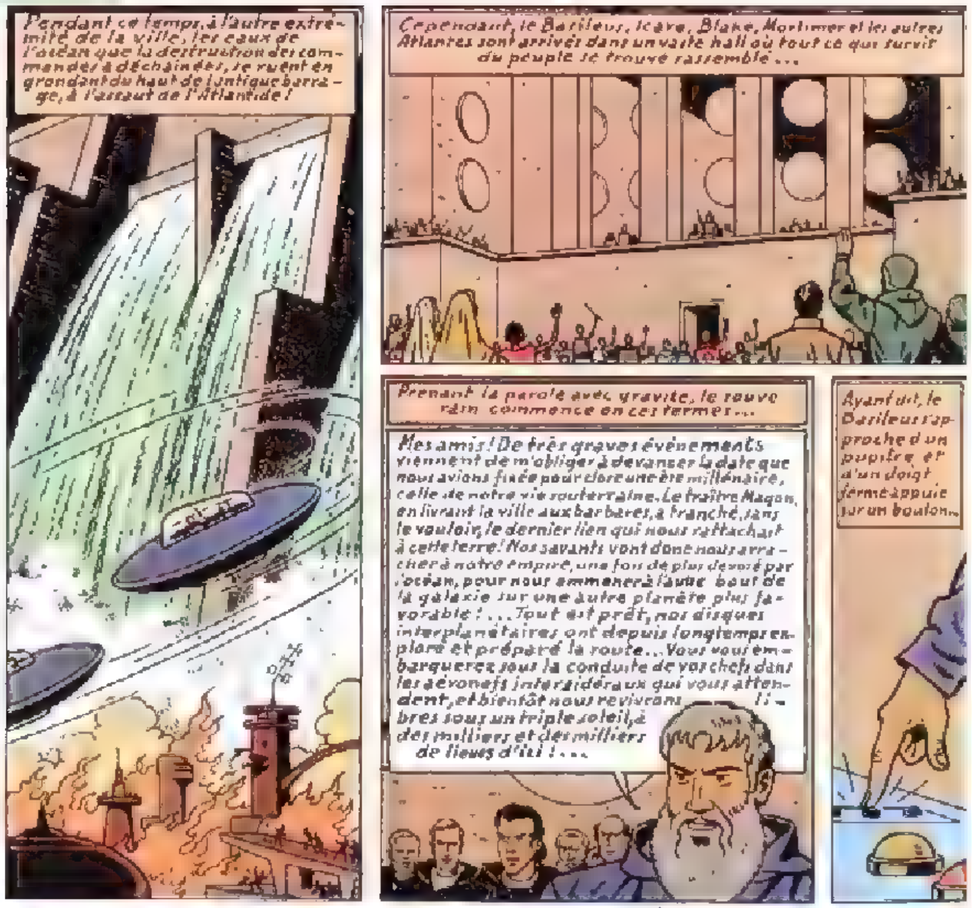
L'Espadon in an epic scene of conflict

Meanwhile he continued to contribute to various magazines and became one of Hergé's first important collaborators. During the war years he coloured Hergé's pre-war albums **Tintin au Congo**, **Tintin In America**, **The Blue Lotus** and **King Ottokar's Sceptre**, and provided background art for **Red Rackham's Treasure**, **The Seven Crystal Balls** and **Prisoners of the Sun**. Although the collaboration with Hergé had ended by 1946, the first issue of **Tintin Magazine**, published in September of that year, contained the first episode of the first **Blake et Mortimer** tale, *Le Secret de l'Espadon*. The continuing adventures of the British army officer and his scientist associate were to occupy Jacobs' comics-producing time for the rest of his life.

What was it about **Blake et Mortimer** that made these albums such a popular and important part of the Franco-Belgian mainstream? One possible reason is the epic scale of imagination demonstrated by Jacobs right from the start. In 1946 most European comics creators were determinedly trying to move on from the enormous and devastating conflict which had just been wracking their lives for almost a decade; Jacobs may have been no exception, but with *Le Secret de l'Espadon* he took a rather different tack. From the very beginning of it he throws a realistically depicted world into a far more shattering global conflict, in which an Oriental empire quickly subdues the entire planet and smashes the global centres of population to pieces. Against this setting Jacobs plays out an extended story, three albums in length, in which the two heroes travel across the world, evading all attempts at capture by Olrik, the head of the enemy's secret service. Their goal is an underground British military establishment where Mortimer's design for a super-fast jet, l'Espadon (The Swordfish) is being built in a last ditch attempt to smash the Oriental empire in its heartland... In effect, *Le Secret de l'Espadon* celebrates the activities of the wartime resistance groups, anticipates the wave of escape stories that were to be published post-war, and turns the whole idea of global conflict into a huge and exhilarating "boys' own" adventure, at the heart of which two resourceful, decent and caring Brit heroes are pitted against the utterly evil and unscrupulous Olrik. It was an enormously successful formula. Jacobs soon abandoned the epic settings, but the imaginative scope and that central conflict between decency and deceit always remained.

And then there's the art. A comparison of the art in **Le Rayon U** and that in *Le Secret de l'Espadon* reveals that Jacobs had learned a great deal from his association with Hergé. The stylized stiffness of the earlier work has been replaced by a tremendous dynamism in layout, event pacing and figure drawing. Certain of Hergé's iconic tactics have been adopted wholesale – his style of speed lines, the characteristic curling line above the head to indicate confusion or dazedness, for example. At the same time these have been incorporated with a very solid, weighty kind of linework, well suited to a kind of storytelling where action, adventure and spectacle are of more importance than humour. Out of this mixture of dynamism and solidity emerges a cartooning style which is at once exciting and entertaining, but above all *serious*. Prior to 1946 the majority of Franco-Belgian comics art had been humour-oriented; Jacobs was one of the first important creators to establish a way of drawing serious

A colour rough for a classic cover


Pendant ce temps, à l'autre extrémité de la ville, les eaux de l'océan que la destruction des commandes a déchaînées, se ruent en grondant du haut de l'antique barrage, à l'assaut de l'Atlantide!
Cependant, le Bathéus, le vaz, Blake, Mortimer et les autres Atlantes sont arrivés dans un vaste hall où tout ce qui survit du peuple se trouve rassemblé...
Prenant la parole avec gravité, le vieillard commence en ces termes...
Mes amis! De très graves événements viennent de m'obliger à devancer la date que nous avions fixée pour clore une ère millénaire, celle de notre vie souterraine. Le traître Mago, en livrant la ville aux barbares, a tranché, sans le vouloir, le dernier lien qui nous rattachait à cette terre! Nos savants vont donc nous arracher à notre empire, une fois de plus dévasté par l'océan, pour nous emmener à l'autre bout de la galaxie sur une autre planète plus favorable!... Tout est prêt, nos disques interplanétaires ont depuis longtemps exploré et préparé la route... Vous vous embarquerez sous la conduite de vos chefs dans les aérovaisseaux intersidéraux qui vous attendent, et bientôt nous reviverons... Libres sous un triple soleil, à des milliers et des milliers de lieues d'ici!...
Ayant dit, le Bathéus s'approche d'un pupitre, et d'un doigt ferme appuie sur un bouton...
Science fiction (and out of control speech balloons) in L'Énigme de l'Atlantide

material in comics.

Le Secret de l'Espadon was followed in 1950 by the two-album story *Le Mystère de la Grande Pyramide*, another adventure epic in which the two heroes foil Olrik's attempt to plunder a treasure-rich Egyptian burial chamber. Again it's familiar "boys' own" material - Tutankhamun's tomb combined with **King Solomon's Mines** - but the scale is considerably diminished from that of the first story. It's also notable that little, if any reference, is made to the global devastation of preceding events. As was later to be the case in 1960s US Marvel comics, continuity in Jacobs' work is about characters and plot points, and not concerned with overall settings.

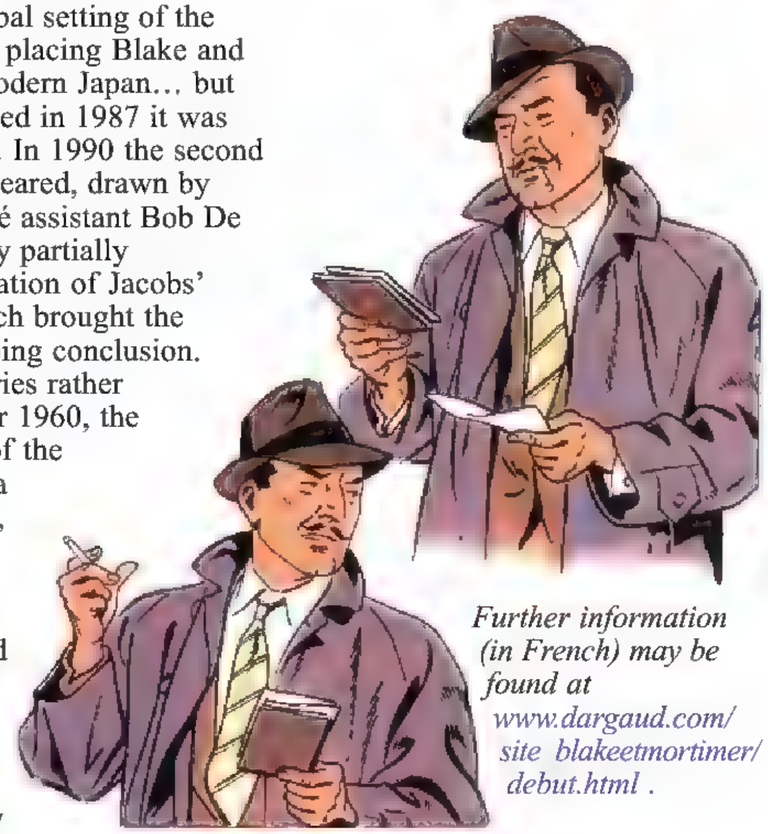
While *Le Mystère de la Grande Pyramide* is an enjoyable romp, most readers agree that Jacobs reached a peak with the third Blake and Mortimer story, *La Marque Jaune* (1953). The first single album story in the series, it's remarkably intense, the more so for being largely set in the gloomy docklands of East London; whole sections of it are coloured primarily in varying shades of grey and brown. The story content is transformed from the international epic to that of a science fiction thriller; the plot concerns a mind-control device, and the heroes' search for the thieves of the British Crown Jewels. The art reaches a kind of apex of realism; with the story set entirely in London, Jacobs researched his locations and drew them with remarkable precision and accuracy. In short, the story retained the central conflict between heroes and villain (although Olrik's role is less obvious than usual), but everything else had changed; and the result was a brooding, unforgettable masterpiece.

The 1950s was, in fact, the great decade in Jacobs' career. 1955 brought another science fiction thriller, *L'Énigme de l'Atlantide*, in which the sense of the epic returns somewhat as the heroes, exploring in the Azores, stumble upon the underground realm of Atlantis, get caught up in a civil war and witness the eventual emigration of the Atlanteans into outer space. In this album Jacobs' much parodied wordiness is very noticeable - too many panels are crammed with words, leaving just a tiny image of the speaker's head in one corner - but as a piece of highly original and vividly realised science fiction it remains very impressive.

Even better, in this writer's estimation, is *S.O.S. Météorés* (1958), a "cold war" piece in which Mortimer stumbles upon a weather control laboratory financed by the Soviets and policed by a gang of ruffians headed by Olrik. Set-piece chase scenes, steadily developed detection work and beautiful depictions of a wintry French rural setting mesh together to create an immensely attractive and well-paced piece. Unusually, the next album, **Le Piège Diabolique** (1960), was a direct sequel to its predecessor, involving Mortimer in a time machine trap devised by the vengeful chief scientist behind the weather control plot. It was also unique in that Olrik was entirely absent, and Blake only made the briefest of appearances. Although the plot is as imaginative and skilfully handled as any devised by Jacobs during the 1950s, it may be that his interest in his trio of protagonists had begun to wane.

Indeed, the end of the series was near. Five years were to pass before the next **Blake et Mortimer** story - and *L'Affaire du Collier* is a rather mundane "whodunit", with the heroes reduced to the status of amateur detectives and Olrik cast as a mere thief. Apart from one excellent set piece in which Blake and Mortimer wander hopelessly through lightless catacombs beneath Paris, the main point of interest about it is a more open, light-toned art style, with fewer panels per page and a sharp observance of changes in everyday fashion. This change in art style was even more marked, and accompanied by a much lighter touch with colouring, in 1970's *Les Trois Formules du Professeur Sato*. After the disappointment of the preceding story Jacobs returned to science fiction, and even to the global setting of the earliest stories, placing Blake and Mortimer in modern Japan... but when Jacobs died in 1987 it was still unfinished. In 1990 the second part finally appeared, drawn by long time Hergé assistant Bob De Moor in an only partially successful imitation of Jacobs' 1970 style which brought the series to a limping conclusion.

Yet if the series rather fizzled out after 1960, the achievements of the 1950s made it a popular classic, one which remains available in newsagents and supermarkets throughout France and Belgium today and has already spawned three sequels (which conspicuously abandon Jacobs' constant updating of his series, instead adopting the 1950s as setting and the art style of *Le Marque Jaune* as template). In the decade before the growth of the modern French BD for adults, Jacobs singlehandedly established a precedent for strongly constructed, serious thriller comics which could be enjoyed by children and equally savoured by adults. The **Blake et Mortimer** stories may lack profundity or psychological resonance – but at their best they are some of the finest adventure comics ever created. They're available today in a number of European languages, but are difficult to find in English. Several of them were translated by Catalan Communications in the late 1980s and early 1990s; good luck in finding them!



Further information (in French) may be found at www.dargaud.com/site_blakeetmortimer/debut.html .

SCARLET AND OTHER STORIES

What is it about the Red Planet at the moment? No sooner does the anticipated second series of Alan Moore's ***League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*** *kick off, utilising several vintage fictitious versions of Mars, then along comes another one, courtesy of Ian Edginton and D'Israeli - though, as Jay Eales reveals, it's been a long time in gestation...*

FOLLOWING their acclaimed collaboration on Kingdom of the Wicked at Caliber, Ian Edginton and D'Israeli conceived Scarlet Traces in 1993, as a printed work; but it would be 7 years before it was finally commissioned by Cool Beans Productions, for their ill-fated online comics venture Cool Beans World (with whose story long-time Borderline readers will be more than familiar). Reconceived to make use of the online medium, with sound effects and simple animations, two instalments of Scarlet Traces appeared on CBW before the company went into receivership in May 2002. Luckily, Edginton was able to disentangle the rights to the series from the wreckage and sell it to the Judge Dredd Megazine, where it is being serialized between September and November, in issues 4.16-4.18, bringing the project back to the form it was originally envisaged in.

Running to sixty-four full colour pages, and commencing with an extra-length first chapter, *Scarlet Traces* takes the scenario of H.G. Wells' War Of The Worlds and extrapolates from its ending what might have happened next, given the amount of Martian technology left lying around the place. Ten years on, and the British Empire has restored itself to pre-eminence with the help of its Martian booty; Britain has replaced the wheel with mechanised spider-legged contraptions; Martian death rays have been adapted to provide heat and light for the home; tiny war machines dispose of street vermin such as pigeons. But Britain is hardly a utopian society: Glasgow's factories, for example, have switched to automation, leaving the workforce destitute and forced to eat dogs and cats just to survive - a state of affairs unknown to those living in luxury in London. The Royal Articulated Hussars maintain martial law, with sabres and heat rays.

Against this backdrop, Major Robert Autumn and his faithful Scots manservant Sergeant Archie Currie, veterans of the war against the Martians, find themselves embroiled in a

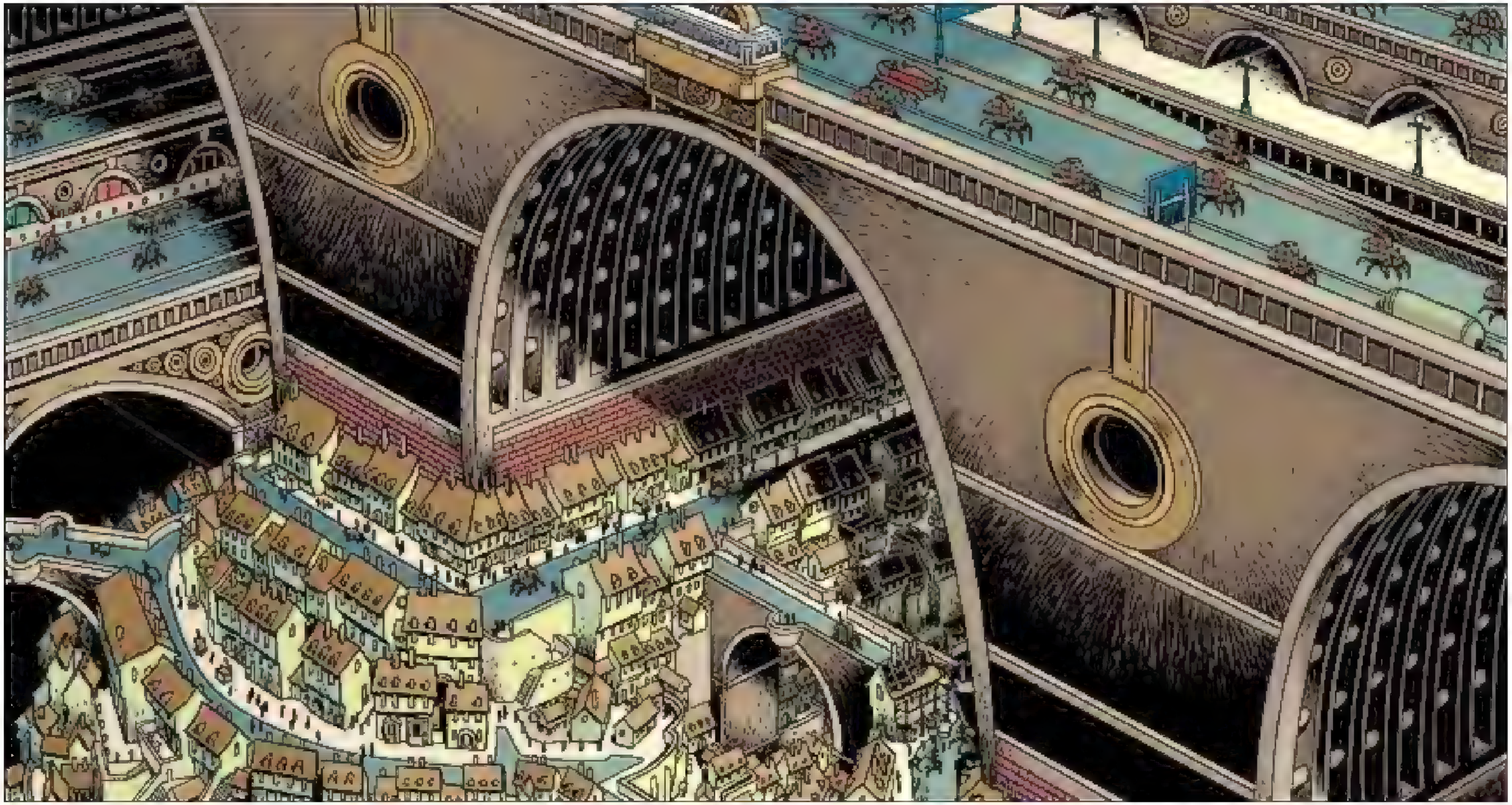
Images by D'Israeli from Scarlet Traces. Bottom left and right are the two Megazine covers, the title which Scarlet Traces is appearing in.

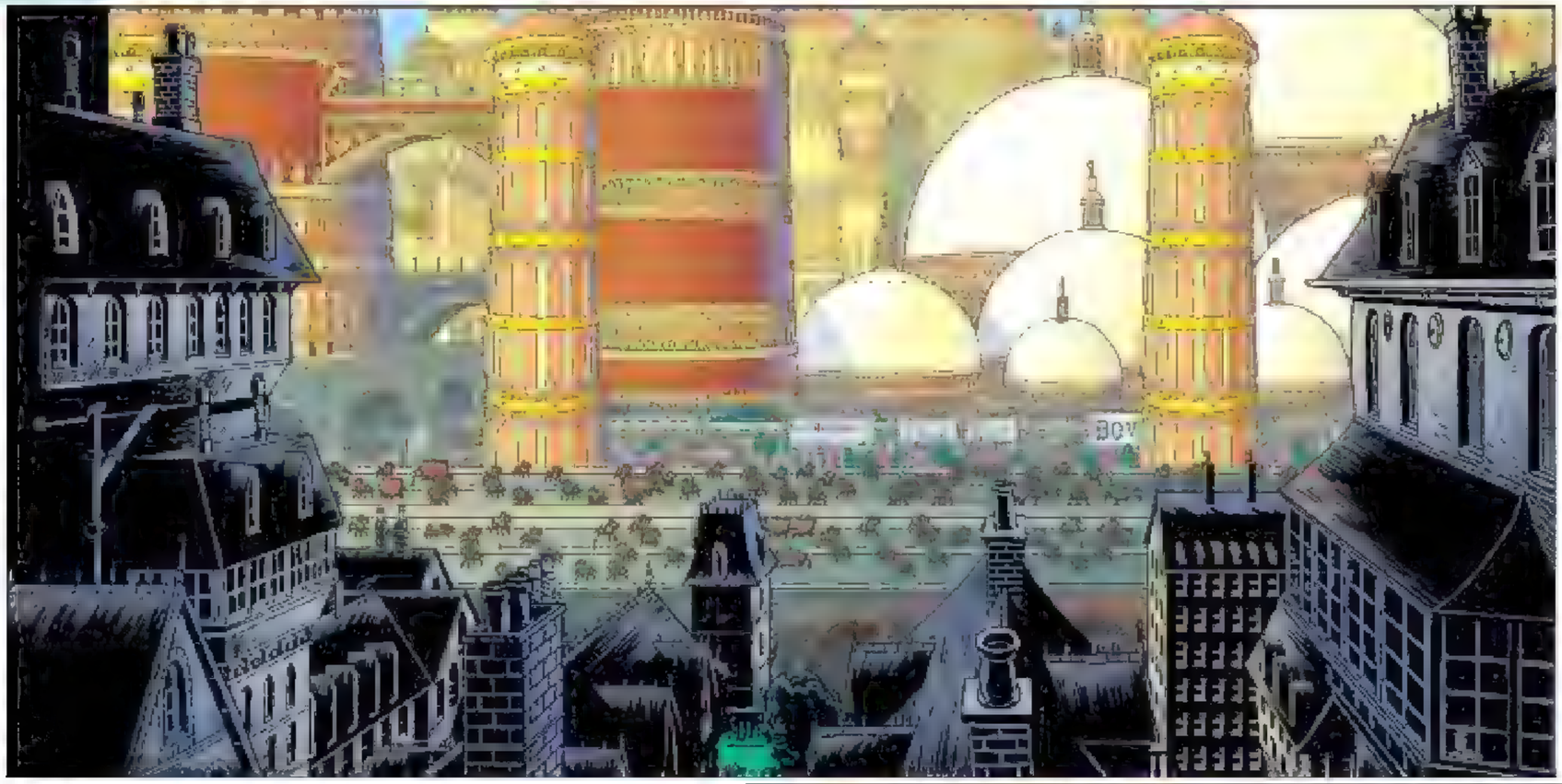
murder mystery. Investigating the disappearance of Currie's niece, who had left Scotland to find work in London, they soon find events escalating out of control. When a number of bodies of young women wash ashore, drained of their blood, the word on the street is that Old Varney [the vampire] is back...

Edginton and D'Israeli continue the tradition that Edginton brought to his recently concluded series for Wildstorm, The Establishment, by peppering *Scarlet Traces* with cameo appearances by the likes of Tintin, and references to Walford, setting of the long-running UK soap opera *Eastenders*. But these little homages do not detract from the story being told - they are just little nods of acknowledgement to those readers who pick up on them.

D'Israeli told Borderline: "*Scarlet Traces* was three-quarters finished when Cool Beans went belly-up. Once we'd sorted out a deal with Alan Barnes at the Megazine, we were given sixty-four pages for the whole thing. After collating the existing material into portrait-format print comic pages (largely by pasting two landscape-format web-pages together to make each print page), we had sixteen pages left to complete the story, and about two months in which to do them. Luckily, we'd always planned to do a print version of *Scarlet Traces*, so I'd drawn and coloured all the pages at print size/resolution, even though first use was for the web."

"In order to fit everything into the space provided, we've had to increase the storytelling density a bit (not so many of those full and half-page panels in the last chapter), but I think it



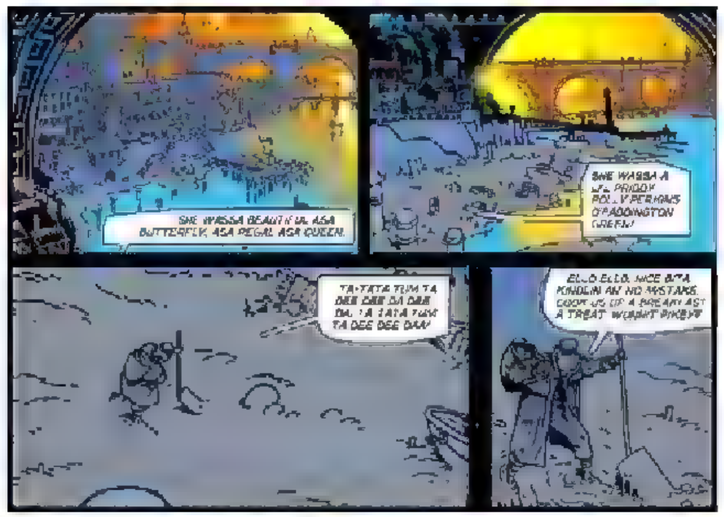


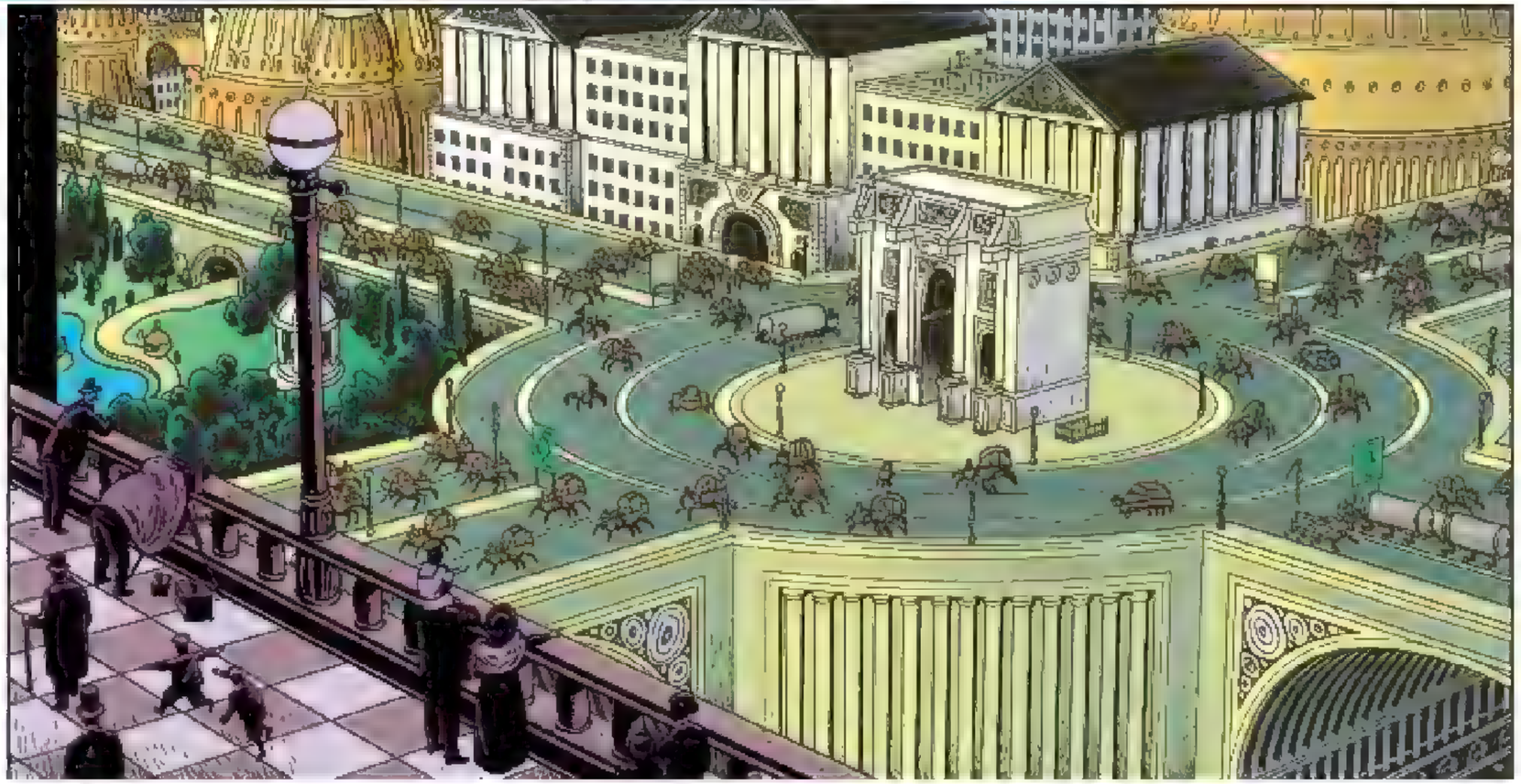
still looks good. I'm surprised at how quickly I'm getting stuff done - partly I think that was down to the animated elements creating lots of extra drawing in the web version, and partly it was due to the fact that I'm more afraid of Tharg than I am of Nick [Cool Beans' owner] Percival!"

D'Israeli explained a little about the parts that had to be discarded in transforming the story for the printed page: "We had to lose a couple of animated pages in episode one (they didn't make sense without the animation), and quite a chunk of the start of part three was jettisoned or cannibalized in order to compress the storytelling. We are running our own site for it, which contains deleted scenes and extra features *(www.disraeli.plus.com/)*."

While it's a little early to gauge reaction to the series in the letters pages, fans on the 2000AD net-based forums have been extremely enthusiastic about the story, on a par with feedback about fan favourites like Gordon Rennie and Frazer Irving's *Necronauts*, still criminally without a collected edition. D'Israeli commented: "We've been really pleased with feedback so far - Ian and I have both had positive messages from pros and fans alike, and I think this is the most response I've ever had to any job."

Copies of Judge Dredd Megazine #4.16 can be obtained from https://slate.site-secure.net/2000adonline/secure/shop/?username (check for availability). Issue #4.17 is currently on sale in UK shops, and the conclusion of Scarlet Traces will be in #4.18, available from 20th November, priced £3.95.


SHE WASSA BEAUTIFUL ASA BUTTERFLY, ASA PEARL ASA QUEEN.
SHE WASSA A
TA-TATA TUM TA DEE DEE DA DEE DA, TA TATA TUM TA DEE DEE DAH!
ELLO ELLO, WOT A PALAVA AN NO MISTAKE, COOPS UP, IT A BREAKY AST A TREAT WOSNT IN?



SALES PUSH BEGINS WITH FIRST 25¢ COMIC

Another pulse-pounding promotion from the House of Press Releases is to rear its head in 2003 - the Marvel Quarter Comic. Borderline's *Mike Sivier investigates the latest in a long line of hyperbole from the company, and asks whether the choice of Daredevil has anything to do with a certain upcoming movie...*

MARVEL Comics is to slash the price of top titles to just 25 cents next year - starting with **Daredevil** #41, the first chapter in a new story arc entitled *Lowlife*, by the regular team of Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev. Sadly this does not mean a return to the days when *every* issue of **Daredevil** cost 25c (around 1972). It initiates a new promotional tactic which Marvel says will help retailers attract new readers.

The programme aims to focus retailers' and readers' attention on the company's finest characters, creators and titles at special jumping-on points. It is the brainchild of Gui Karyo, Marvel's chief information officer. He explained: "The most effective way to attract new readers to our best books is to simply lower the price point on entry-point issues."

So why choose **Daredevil**? Surely the start of a new story isn't the only reason? Joe Quesada, Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, hit the nail on the head: "Timing wise, this 25 cent issue couldn't come at a more appropriate moment, with the *Daredevil* movie set to open on February 14. I can't think of a better Valentine's Day gift to fans and retailers alike. Oh, and speaking of Valentine's Day, I hear that Matt Murdock may be bumping into his next great love in this one as well, so it's sure to be a landmark issue."

In other words, it's a marketing tie-in with the movie. Scribe Brian Michael Bendis isn't bothered, though. "I couldn't be happier that this issue is getting this extra push," he said. "I know a lot of people have heard that Daredevil's secret identity has been 'outed' in the New York City tabloids, and starting with this issue everyone will get a look at what it is we're doing with the premise and why we're all excited about the direction of the series."

Daredevil #41 will go on sale on January 8, with **Daredevil** #42 following just two weeks later, on January 22. Marvel says the increased frequency is to help retailers capitalize on the increased interest in the series.

If the experiment works, it's also likely to make Marvel a buck or two - especially since the company has announced that January 2003 is "Daredevil Month", with a plethora of new projects or trade paperback reprints available to mark the event.

Daredevil: The Movie is the 48-page official comic book adaptation of the film. Featuring art by Manuel Garcia, it is written by Bruce Jones, critically acclaimed scripter of **The Incredible Hulk**.

In case a 48-page comicbook, priced at $3.50, makes you feel you're not getting your money's worth, Marvel has packaged it up with a selection of classic DD stories for a 128-page trade paperback, confusingly also titled **Daredevil: The Movie**. This one retails at $12.99.

Besides the three current DD-related titles - **Daredevil**, **Elektra** and **Ultimate Daredevil and Elektra**, Marvel has a list of no less than 13 other Daredevil trade collections, either new or already printed.

It's an herculean effort in the run-up to the Ben Affleck movie, but one wonders whether as good a result could not be achieved by placing a box on the title's cover: "As spoofed in the deleted scenes of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*."

Shock! Secret Origin Outed!

In case you *really* don't know already...

A Good Samaritan act led to the loss of young Matt Murdock's sight, but also secretly enhanced his remaining senses and gifted him with an amazing "radar" sense.

After becoming a lawyer - and suffering the murder of his father - Matt decided to use his powers to protect the innocent in New York City's Hell's Kitchen.

Now he stalks the streets at night, a relentless avenger of justice - Daredevil, the Man Without Fear.

12 O'Clock Lock

This month Selina Lock muses over expectations and perceptions.

You can find a Maus in Poland, but can you find one in Borders?

BEING the bookworm that I am, I was quite excited to find out that a new Borders bookstore was opening in Leicester, UK - the city we are currently moving to. So I ambled along to the grand opening of the store with my boyfriend and another friend, book tokens clutched in my sweaty hands. As Borders is an American chain, I was anticipating them having a decent graphic novel section and had decided that if they did I would treat myself to both volumes of **Maus**, a long overdue purchase. I expounded on this intention as we fought through the Saturday afternoon traffic, explaining to my non-comics reading friend that **Maus** was a true story involving the experiences of a Jewish family from World War II onwards, and that, as she was very interested in history, she may enjoy reading them.

So we entered the bustling shop in high spirits, each heading for different sections of interest. I browsed through the science fiction section for a while, looked for a few favourite authors and then decided to start on my quest for the graphic novel area. After discovering that it wasn't near the sci-fi I tried near the children's section – nope, not there either, so I started wandering up and down every aisle. The ground floor looked barren so I headed upstairs, steered clear of the lure of a Starbucks frappacino, got slightly distracted by the DVDs, and then spied a section called Comics & Cartoons. Aha! I thought that looked likely. After perusing the shelves I realised that if I had been looking for **Calvin and Hobbes** or **Garfield** this was the place to be but there was no sign of **Maus**; there weren't even any signs of **Spider-Man** or **Batman**!

By this time I was getting a bit fed up, and had come to the conclusion that obviously American owned bookstores were no more likely to stock graphic novels than many British stores. Grumbling at my friends, I decided I would stick to my latest hobby of reading children's books instead, and headed back downstairs. On the way down I spied an information desk and decided I had nothing to lose by asking about graphic novels. The assistant beamed and said she would show me the graphic novel section. Hurrah! I thought I had missed the obvious in my desperate searching… Umm, not quite, the section turned out to be about 6 shelves that reached my waist, and was located under the stairs. Under the stairs!! No wonder I hadn't noticed it. It did have a couple of good things about it, such as the eight year old kid sitting in front of it devouring a **Spider-Man** trade with joy, the **Road to Perdition** display tying in with the film release, and the single copies of the **Maus** books I grabbed from the shelf. However, my mission to buy a classic graphic novel from a large, city bookstore had been somewhat more difficult than I had expected.

I guess my perception of comics being more prevalent in the US had led me to expect different things from an American-owned store than of a British one. Even though I know that comics are still a marginal form of entertainment in the US compared to other media, I still think of them being more common owing to the amount of publishers based there compared to the UK.

So, I perceive comics/graphic novels as being big in America while Borders perceive them as being worth stocking but not worth having a big section. I mean, I can just imagine the floor planner thinking: "Umm, I have some space under the stairs. What can we put there? Something with a minority following, perhaps. Oh yeah, graphic novels.".

It just shows that we should always be open-minded to other people's perceptions of things. My viewpoint towards comics has altered considerably over the last few years, from the assumption that they were exclusively superhero-dominated things that barely registered on my radar, to the revelation that there could be comics as diverse as any other form of writing. As I discover new gems and new favourite creators, comics now make up a large percentage of my choice in reading material these days.

I'm sure my perceptions will carry on changing as I discover more comics; and hopefully creators will strive to produce works that will exceed my expectations. I just hope that when I finally get the time to read **Maus** it will live up to its reputation, and provide me with new perceptions about history and other cultures.

Of course I'm not sure I want all my preconceptions changing. I'd like to go on believing that comics are a mainstream entertainment in the rest of Europe, and in Japan; and that there is a comics utopia waiting for me out there, if only I'd stop being stereotypically English and learn some other languages.

12 O'Clock Lock will return in Casino Royale.

Rainey w/ Alienor Johnson

THE WHO "CAN-CREATE "THE-MOST-SUPER-HEROES CONTEST BEGAN IN 1970.

CAPTAIN SCOTLAND. CAPTAIN BRAZIL. CAPTAIN IRAN.

WAIT A MINUTE! SLOW DOWN! WHAT ARE CAPTAIN SCOTLAND'S POWERS?

ER... STRENGTH. FLIGHT. EYE BEAMS.

AND CAPTAIN BRAZIL'S?

STRENGTH. FLIGHT. EYE BEAMS.

STRENGTH. FLIGHT. EYE BEAMS.

WHAT ARE THEIR POWERS?

IN THAT CASE I'M HAVING MISS SCOTLAND, SCOTTISH LAD AND SCOTTISH GIRL!

NO, I AIN'T! CAPTAIN SCOTLAND WEARS A KILT!

YOU CAN'T DO THAT! THAT'S CHEATING! YOU'VE ONLY GOT THE ONE SUPERHERO COMING FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES!

COMICS 2040

by Paul Rainey Oct 2002

1990. THE OBJECT OF THE GAME IS TO CREATE MORE SUPERHEROES THAN YOUR OPPONENT.

MILK MAID.

MILK MAID? WHAT'RE HER POWERS?

SHE FIRES A HIGHLY CORROSIVE LIQUID FROM HER NIPPLES.

SIGH. VERY WELL. I'LL LET YOU HAVE THAT ONE.

MILK MAN.

THERE'S ALREADY A MILK MAN. WHAT ABOUT REID FLEMING?

MILK BOY. MILK GIRL. MILK DOG. CAPTAIN MILK MAID. SERGEANT MILK MAID.

ON SECOND THOUGHTS, I I DON'T WANT TO KNOW.

THAT'S HIS JOB TITLE, NOT HIS SUPERHERO IDENTITY.

HE FIRES A HIGHLY CORROSIVE LIQUID FROM HIS...

WHAT'RE MILK MAN'S POWERS, THEN?

Comics 2040 by Paul

2010.

CAPTAIN BRAZIL FROM EARTH A. CAPTAIN BRAZIL FROM EARTH B. CAPTAIN BRAZIL FROM EARTH C.

WAIT A MINUTE! ARE YOU GOING TO DO THIS WITH EVERY CHARACTER YOU'VE CREATED?

YES. AND YOURS.

SIGH. WHY DON'T I SAVE US BOTH TIME AND JUST MULTIPLY ALL ENTRIES BY TWENTY SIX AND GIVE ALL THE POINTS TO YOU?

SOUNDS FAIR.

WHAT'S THE HIGHEST NUMBER YOU CAN THINK OF? NOW DOUBLE IT.

WAIT A MINUTE! HOW MANY DIMENSIONS ARE THERE?

RIGHT. CAPTAIN BRAZIL FROM DIMENSION 1. CAPTAIN BRAZIL FROM DIMENSION 2.

2045

THE DOCTOR SAYS I WON'T LAST THE NIGHT.

TELL ME... ...WHO WON THE CONTEST?

YOU DID.

ERG

I'VE HAD A GOOD LIFE.

SO, HE WON THE CONTEST, AFTER ALL.

DID HE BOLLOCKS! HE DIED FIRST, THAT MAKES ME THE WINNER!

THE VERDICT

COMICS REVIEWS

Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why Borderline's review column is the best and fairest in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David R. Booth (DRB)
Andrew Cheverton (AC)
Jay Eales (JE)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Phil Hall (PH)
Kev Hill (KH)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Steve Miller (SM)
Martin Shipp (MS)
Andy Winter (AW)

Have you got a book that requires a Verdict?
Then send it to Borderline (details on page 2.)
Have you got a Verdict on a book? Yes? Then Borderline wants you!
Contact Andy Winter: reviews@borderlinemagazine.co.uk
for reviewing details.

The Authority: Kev
By Garth Ennis & Glenn Fabry
Wild Storm

I'm sorry, but I expect more than a load of shite for my $4.95. I read the comments of a well-known comics editor on a mailing list recently, recommending this pile of dross-covered bilge. And some of you bastards had the audacity to disagree with my review of The Pro? Jesus H. Where The Pro was both humorous and actually quite sympathetic to its comics roots, this is just a shambles about all the way through. Where Ennis used all the disgusting jokes imaginable in The Pro and got away with it, here he wheels out every clichéd piece of bollix in existence and doesn't even bother to polish them up.

A fairly unlucky, but obviously pretty handy British intelligence wetworks op is coerced into assassinating The Authority - using magic bullets. Amazingly he succeeds in double quick time. Dead, every last one of them, in a host of disgusting exit wound shots... blood, guts, brains, bits of tyre tread and a few gaskets. It happens in two pages.

And it's all very funny and the word "wanker" is said numerous times. You see, this isn't really an Authority story, it's Garth Ennis doing "The Authority: A Sitcom". But the plot, which you could sail a dozen aircraft carriers through, quickly loses any idea it might have had of getting back on track and becomes a contrived mess of dialogue just written to squeeze another joke or insult in.

I'm pretty sure The Authority could be quite offensive to some people. However, this is just thoroughly offensive. It could have been done with the JLA or The Avengers or, actually, quite easily with X-Factor when they lived onboard the sentient Ship. In fact, has anybody ever noticed how The Authority is just Walt and Weezie's X-Factor with bad language?

Glenn Fabry has been doing a lot of pencil art recently. He did an issue of Birds of Prey which was quite awful. For starters he draws women like they're all Fatima Whitbread (or, for the benefit of the non-Brits in the house, Eastern Bloc shot-putters). His style is all over the place and looks like he's been borrowing heavily from a number of artists, none of which I'm going to name.

The Verdict: In the words of the writer, "shite"! (DRB)

2000AD #1309-1313
By Various Creators
Rebellion

It is a great time to be reading 2000AD at the moment, as it is truly shaping up to be The Galaxy's Greatest Comic. The *Dredd* strips have been exemplary of late, with sharp writing plus some superb art from a variety of top artists. *The Scrap* is a story that transcends its conventional sci-fi trappings to end on a highly interesting note, with some excellent art. *Sinister Dexter* has risen above some dull parody to become quite entertaining, especially in some comedic stories in Progs 1311 and 1312. Prog 1313 introduces a couple of interesting new strips alongside strong regular strips, including the very topical, if UK-centric, *Asylum*.

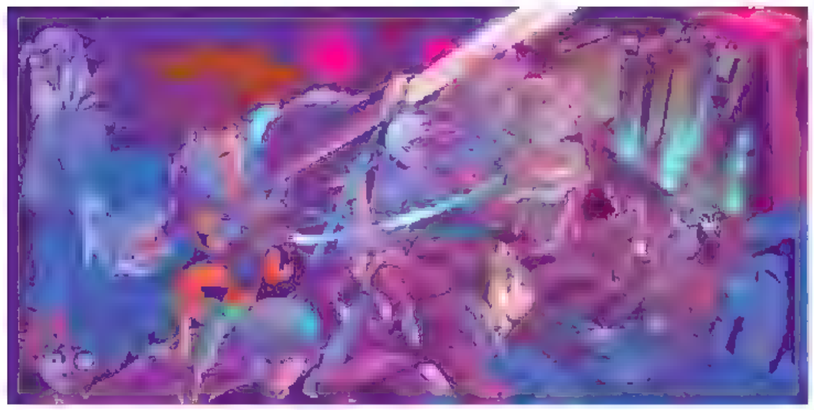
The Verdict: With 2000AD still on a high point at the moment, this is an excellent time to be reading. (KG)

Avengers #58
By Geoff Johns & Kieron Dwyer
Marvel

The second part of *World Trust* is as impressive as the first. Geoff Johns has started his tenure on this book well, it's just a shame that Marvel has traded in the good artists and brought in Keiron Dwyer. Dwyer is probably best known for being John Byrne's nephew or something, but don't let that put you off, Dwyer doesn't need Byrne's help to prove he's a crap artist.

The Verdict: A good story spoilt by the art. (DRB)

Arkanium #1
By Brandon Easton and Thomas Lesean
Dreamwave

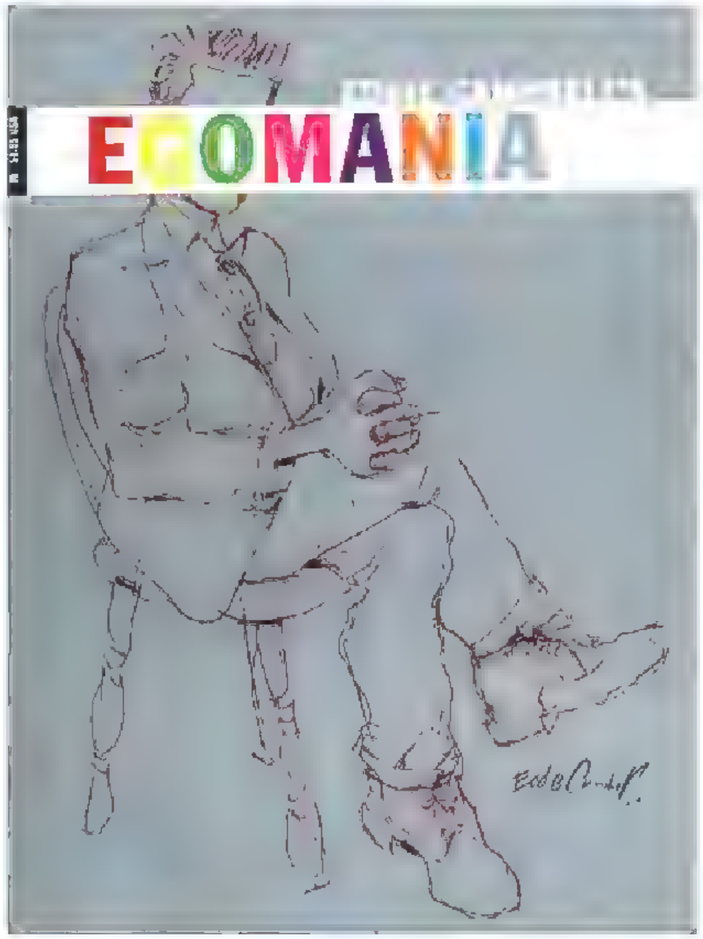


This is an interesting beast. Part sci-fi, part mystical, but nearly all kung-fu - I expect these guys have overdosed on Hong Kong action films and Japanese cartoons. Lesean has a nice style, highly influenced by Japan - but with something extra that so few have, something difficult to pin down. Obviously there have to be flaws, and there are a couple of obvious ones. While there's a lot of decent action, some of the story gets lost, and some panels are very confusing, shifting to a new setting with little explanation. The inks also vary in quality something chronic, often being too heavy, ruining whole panels. Lastly, Lesean's figures could do with some work – fully-clothed they're excellent, but his male torsos look awful on occasion.
The Verdict: One to watch, things should get better with age. (KH)

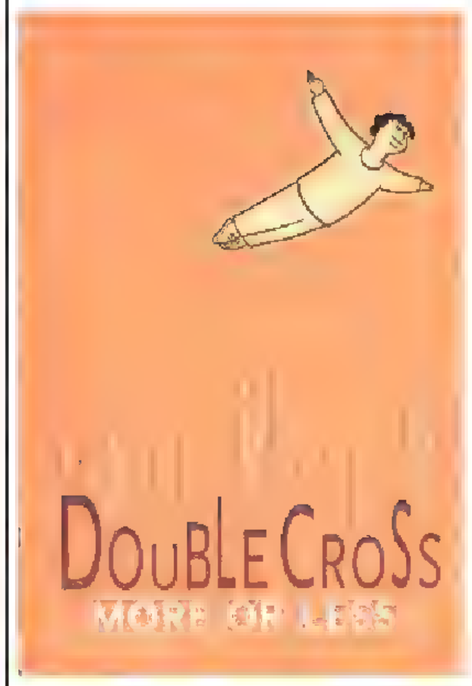
Egomania #1
By Eddie Campbell
Eddie Campbell Books

The more I think about it, the less happy I become with the commonly held belief that a comic communicates primarily through picture sequences. While it fits the output of some national comics cultures, it doesn't fit others at all well – including, oddly enough, the British comics tradition. So although some may look at this volume and wonder where exactly the comics are (Campbell says that it's really "Eddie Campbell's Art Journal" but he was persuaded that it wouldn't sell under that title!), I think I'm quite happy to accept its mixture of a couple of strips with a lot of prose as being a comic.

It's certainly a self-indulgent one, though. Self-publishers can put out comics about whatever they happen to be thinking of at will, of course, and the results are often not all that interesting; but Campbell generally has some worthwhile ideas on the ball and is certainly very capable of writing and drawing them well. Here he traces the history of a 19th century French painting which resides in an Australian bar and has become an Australian historical icon; he talks about the old Batman stories that got him into comics and interviews the artist, Lew Schwartz, about what it was like to have worked as one of Bob Kane's "ghosts"; he runs a report by his daughter on the Hollywood premiere of *From Hell*; and he offers up the first two parts of a comic strip history of humour which look as though it will be rambling, highly discursive and a very great deal of fun.
The Verdict: Of interest to those who think that an erudite writer/artist's musings on the history of popular art are worth reading. (MK)



Double Cross: More or Less
By Tony Consiglio
Top Shelf



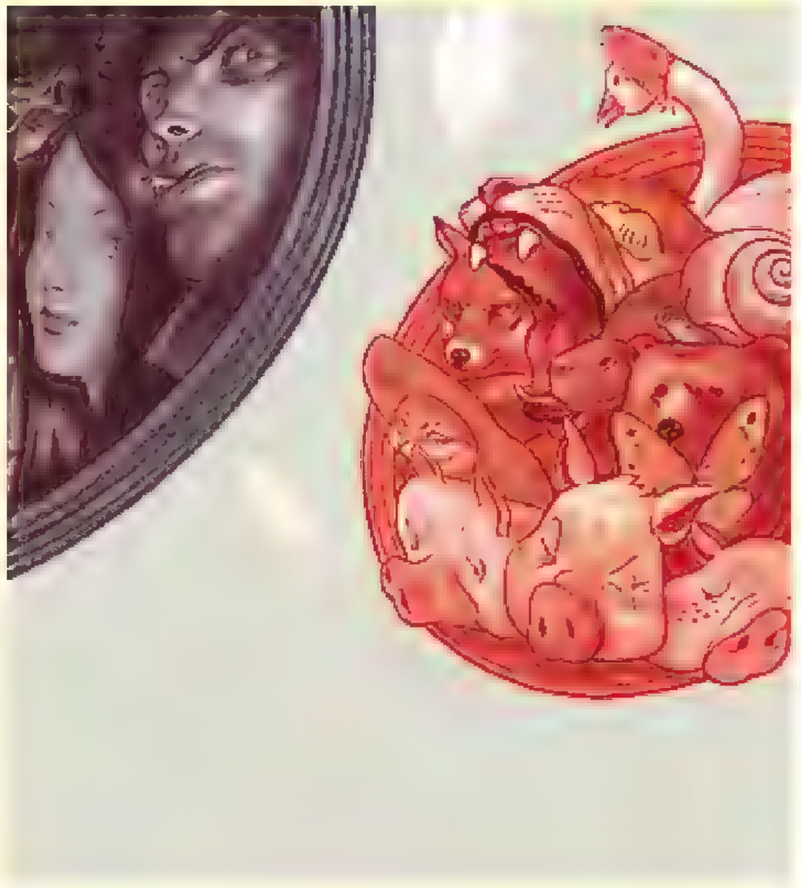
Consiglio's first professionally published comic is as autobiographical as they come. It shows him working on his minicomics and wishing he could break out of his day job as a shop assistant; his life with his partner (and her house-guest brother); family arguments; observations of humanity while travelling to work; and all of this is interspersed with occasional visual references to a dream of flying above and away from it all. As, to some degree, with all such work, it raises the question of how much is real, how much exaggerated, how much just one person's view of it all.

Does that question matter? Perhaps not; the readers' perceptions are as likely to dictate their reaction as are the author's. But Consiglio's strips are so very personal, confined entirely to the everyday details of his life and his perception of it without conveying or even implying any message about life outside of his own confines, that you end up wondering how far the lines of division between truth and art may be blurred here. The art style underlines the question; very individual and seemingly very truthful in its blocky, uncompromising lines, it makes no attempt to glamourise the narrative. But is the book's honesty in fact artificial? Or should it be taken at face value?

I don't know. But there's enjoyment to be had from such questioning.
The Verdict: Disturbingly frank and open, or carefully contrived? Whichever is more true, Consiglio's work compels the reader to question the nature and purpose of the autobiographical, just because it exploits that genre so effectively. (MK)

Fables #6
By Bill Willingham and Mark Buckingham
Vertigo

I had not encountered this title before being given a copy of the latest issue by my local comics chappie, mainly because the premise struck me as rather silly. It still does, to be honest, although there is clearly fun to be had with it. As far as I can tell, there appears to be some kind of Three Little Pigs/ Animal Farm crossover occurring here in the main plot, although I have no idea what the subplots are about. Also, my knowledge of fairy tales is too bitty to pick up all the references, which may have lessened my enjoyment somewhat. I suppose that's what happens when you grow up reading comics instead of children's books! The art is very good, in a subtle and minimalist way, and the art team does a superb job of drawing some very odd things. However, the lack of any decent recap material makes me merely see this as a bit ho-hum, despite the solid writing and art. Yes, I've jumped in at issue six, but it's a new storyline and there should be better recap material.
The Verdict: Well written and very well drawn, but I struggle to be interested. (KG)



The Filth #5
By Grant Morrison and Chris Weston
Vertigo

This month's issue of the far out police/sci fi series concerns a plot to destroy the world using cloned mutant sperm. As ever, Grant Morrison pulls off the absurd with far more success than might be expected, producing an entertaining and exciting story. He's ably assisted by Chris Weston and inker Gary Erskine, who both show their worth as artists by effortlessly illustrating the wilder excesses of the writer's fertile imagination. This comic shouldn't work at all, and yet it does and does so very well. It is one of the best comics available at the moment, although it does defy any kind of description or classification. As such, it is remarkably difficult to review, and all I can say is "buy it!"
The Verdict: Great fun – what more needs to be said? (KG)

Judge Dredd Megazine #4.16
By Various Creators
Rebellion

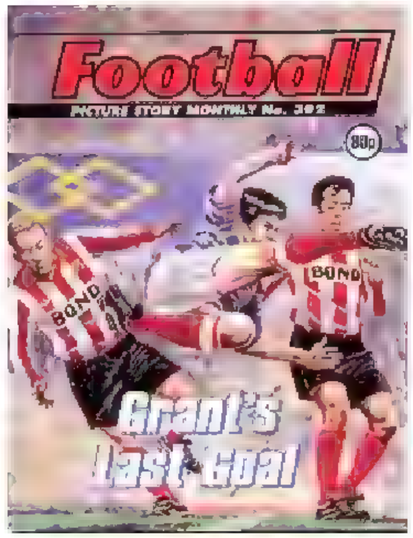
New strips begin this issue, including a reprinted *Rogue Trooper* tale that shows up the embarrassingly retro 2000AD revamp of the character as the failure it is. Splendid art from Steve Dillon and Kevin Walker perfectly complements the strong writing from John Smith. *Durham Red* slides back into the category of filler again after a couple of strong stories, while *Young Middenface McNulty*, despite good art and top writing, seems to be just another "heroin abuse in Glasgow" story... but in the future. The new *Dredd* tale starts off in an intriguing way, with superb art from the impeccable John Ridgway, and new strip *Scarlet Traces* shines due to a fun central premise and the peerless art of D'Israeli *[see pages 36-8 in this issue]*. As always, David Bishop's history of 2000AD is entertaining and informative and an inspired inclusion.
The Verdict: Great stuff as usual, the weaker strips aside, and easily rivalling its sister title in the running for best comics anthology available today. (KG)

Football Picture Story Monthly #392
By Unidentified Creators
DC Thomson

Either distribution is becoming really patchy, or Britain's last surviving soccer comic is somewhat less than monthly these days - this issue's been on the newsagents' shelves for about three months now. It's still there, though, so it's up for review!

Grant's Last Goal is a 64-page story about an aging soccer star's final playing season, and it's as unabashedly sentimental as you might expect. The uncredited writer pulls out all the stops, showing the much-capped Jimmy Grant returning to his first ever club to help it up into the Premier League, appearing on TV's *This Is Your Life*, and spotting the young talent who in the end will replace him. The traditional predictability of it all, from the title on down, works in its favour – what could have come across as a slow-paced tearjerker ends up as a stately, well-paced little story.

The art is full of familiar tricks too; resemblances of characters to real life stars (Grant resembles Kevin Keegan, his young discovery is named "David Brockham" and looks like it), and plenty of examples of what Martin Barker identified as the football comic's excellent capacity for demonstrating the temporal fluidity of sequencing within panels... time and again you'll see a ball being passed, intercepted, shot into goal and reacted to by the spectators, all in one static picture.
Otherwise it isn't anything spectacular, but it isn't supposed to be; it admirably serves its purpose of telling the story clearly, and that's enough.
The Verdict: A nice, solid example of old-fashioned, highly professional British comics storytelling. (MK)



Killraven #1
By Alan Davis
Marvel

The anti-Martian gladiator returns in a bizarre and rather disappointing title. Everything about this is a little odd, with Alan Davis' art seeming crude and tired and the writing being just plain strange. There is a feeling that this is all in some way deliberate, but the motives for it are unclear. The art is empty looking and uninspired, with strange layouts seemingly designed to allow for the least amount of drawing within the panels. The writing is most surprising, with very stilted and clumsy dialogue and a simplistic and often incoherent plot. Perhaps since Killraven and his chums were born and raised as slaves they never grasped the basics of speaking English, but that wouldn't explain why everyone else speaks like a teenage drama student hooked on Shakespeare. Given that Davis has shown in the past that he is an accomplished writer, and that he worked with Alan Moore for years and must have picked up some tips, the crudity of this is just baffling.
The Verdict: It's crap, but it shouldn't be, and it may be worth getting issue two to see if the crapness is deliberate. Possibly. (KG)

Noble Causes: Family Secrets #1
By Jay Faerber and Ian Richardson
Image

First part of a four-issue mini-series continuing the Noble family's fortunes. Notable mainly for featuring nice clean-cut pencils by former Borderline alumnus Ian Richardson, who was offered the gig after appearing in *Drawing Board* but who on this showing would have deserved the job regardless of where he was spotted. Lots of internecine strife in this superior soap, which really is far better than most of the long-running super-hero soaps. Notable also for introducing the neologism "suggorate member" to the language.
The Verdict: Glossy, sparkly, rather involving considering these are characters we know little about. (MS)

Paradigm #1
By Matthew Cashel and Jeremy Haun
Image

There are too many comics, too many of them are mediocre, and it's too easy for comics of quality to get lost in the world of spandex and tits and toys that is Diamond's *Previews*.

Matthew Cashel and Jeremy Hain self-published the first issue of Paradigm earlier this year, and, liking what he saw, Jim Valentino offered them the chance of publishing through Image. Obviously they'll be getting more exposure this way. Image are in the front of the catalogue, they give each book a whole page to shine, and though it is easy to overlook a book in the Image ghetto, Paradigm is unique enough to stand out for itself.

It's a first issue from two new creators. It's a moody black and white piece that poses more questions than it answers, that is undoubtedly flawed, and yet is still intriguing enough that it will make the reader come back for the next issue in search of resolution.

This first issue presents us with fragments of story. Christopher, the main protagonist, is, on the surface of things, merely having girlfriend problems. There's an interlude containing an apparently unrelated murder, a few flashes of surrealism, and towards the end of the issue it lurches headlong into a *Twin Peaks* level of incomprehensibility.

Cashel's dialogue is in the naturalistic post-Bendis school, with more nods to pop culture than you would think possible in a single issue. The comparison to Bendis doesn't do it a disservice though, it's exceptionally well written.

Haun's photo-referenced art is saturated in black, and it can sometimes be difficult to work out what's going on. In addition to this, a lot of the pages are guilty of trying to cram too much in. The art would benefit from fewer panels per page, and more room to breathe.

Despite these faults, it's still a hugely enjoyable first issue that manages to draw you right into the story and then leave you hanging at the end. It could all go horribly wrong, but it's one of the freshest new comics I've seen this year and it deserves the higher exposure that the Image deal will hopefully bring.
The Verdict: A promising start from two new creators. Well worth investigating. (SM)

Planetary/JLA: Terra Occulta

By Warren Ellis and Jerry Ordway

Wildstorm

A JLA analogue struggles to free Earth from a version of Planetary that are more like The Four from the regular Planetary series. This is well written; Warren Ellis does a good job of blending the two titles, making what might have been a jarring contrast of disparate styles into a smooth and ultimately logical mix. Jerry Ordway's art seems at first to be rather inappropriate for the title but on the whole this is very successful, and it is only in comparison with regular Planetary artist John Cassaday that Ordway can really be deemed unsuitable for the book. The biggest problem with this comic, though, is that like many Elseworlds titles it seems rather pointless. Nothing new or important is said and, along with the definite feeling that this is cobbled together from bits of the regular series, it all seems like little more than a made-to-order money-spinner.

The Verdict: As with all Planetary books, this is very good but, as with all Elseworlds books, it is rather pointless. (KG)

Punisher #16

By Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson

Marvel

Guest-starring Wolverine, who gets his face shotgunned off and so spends the latter part of the issue with an exposed skull and talking like a ventriloquist's dummy ("I'm the gest there is"). The usual manic hyper-violence, raising the question: is Garth Ennis taking the rise out of his audience? The characters? Who? Is he taking the rise at all? Artist Darick Robertson adds a stoic thuggishness to the Punisher that further heightens the absurdity of it all. Oh, and there's a cameo appearance by Spider-Man.

The Verdict: Incredibly funny, which is quite worrying. (MS)

Queen & Country #12

By Greg Rucka and Leandro Fernandez

Oni Press

Bringing the *Crystal Ball* storyline - and artist Fernandez's tenure - to an end, this title (and its publisher) really proves that mature, adult and commercial storytelling is no longer the sole province of Vertigo. What really works in Queen & Country is the low-key, behind the scenes concentration that Rucka excels in: building a cast of flawed, sympathetic and believable characters, he then lets them loose in an understated, almost mundane environment so closely modelled on current affairs that you can't help but wonder what goes on behind the facade of government spin and press releases.

Fernandez has been a revelation, provoking a storm of controversy with an utterly unique style that has brought a vivid exaggeration to the cast and a wonderful sense of dramatic style to the very look of the comic. His art - imagine Eduardo Russo inking Tim Sale - has been fluid, solid and impeccable.

The Verdict: Perhaps the best this comic has ever looked, and as well written as it ever was. A class act all round. (AC)

The Resistance #1

By Jimmy Palmiotti, Justin Gray and Juan Santacruz

Wildstorm

This book is chock-full of ideas. It's brimming with them. The thing is, they've all been seen before, elsewhere - that's not to take anything away from the creators, as this is a blisteringly paced issue that's virtually a single action sequence from page 4 onwards. Old ideas, then, but well executed. The artwork suits the story, although Santacruz's backgrounds and technical skills are far better than his figures - these look too simple and caricatured against the more detailed scenes.

The Verdict: Steeped in cliché, but still fun. (KH)

Star Wars Tales #13

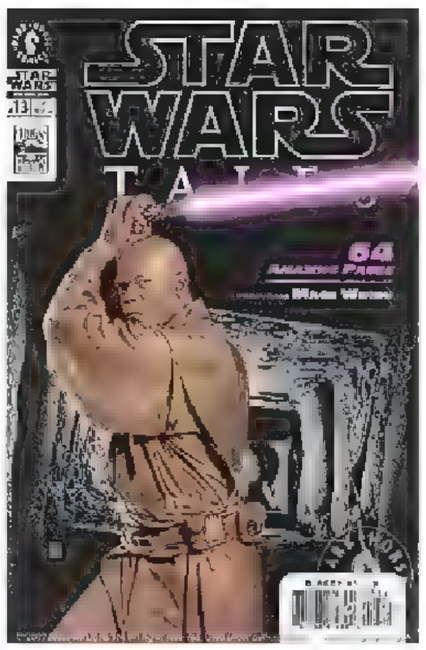
By Various Creators

Dark Horse

It comes to something when, while trying to review a comic, you have to look through every story in order to remember what they were about. I don't mean just a quick scan either but a proper look, and in the case of two of the stories I had to read the whole damn thing again. And I only read the bloody comic a couple of days ago.

The artists Timothy II and Jerome Opena are quite astonishingly talented and deserve a special mention, otherwise I wouldn't even bother giving this issue column space. Look out for them both: in an ideal world they would be given a high-profile assignment.

The Verdict: A seriously sub-standard issue with not one of the stories standing out, but as a showcase for great art this deserves a look. (AC)



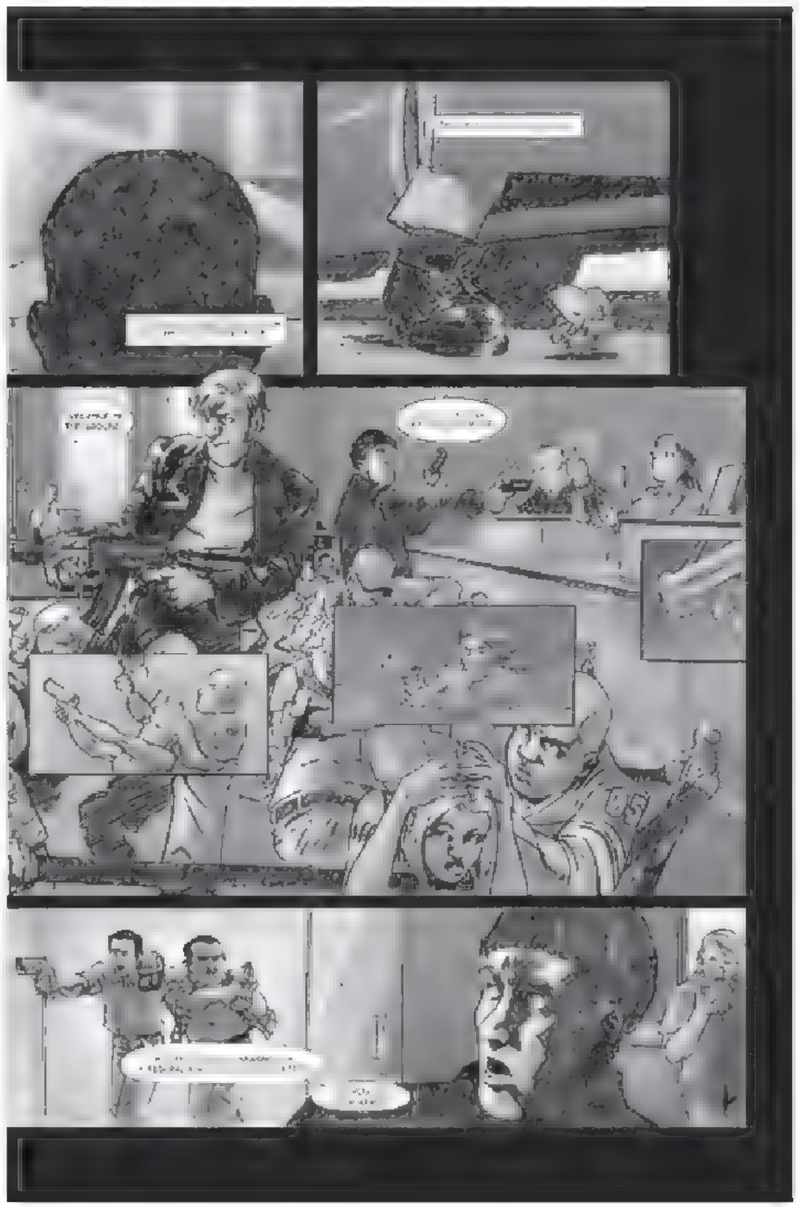
Skinwalker #4

By Nunzio DeFilippis & Christina Weir and Brian Hurtt & Arthur Dela Cruz

Oni Press

This is the end of another miniseries with yet another unresolved storyline, as the writers don't seem able to bid farewell to their cast with a strong, decisive denouement, preferring instead to lead into the hope of a sequel. But I've wittered on about this subject elsewhere in this issue...

DeFilippis and Weir seem very capable of transferring the energy and pace of a police procedural onto the comics page, but their attitude to horror seems very subtle and understated. Maybe it's me, but the horrific aspects of the skinwalker ceremonies being conducted in modern times were never really explored; perhaps they're also waiting in the wings for a follow-up series.



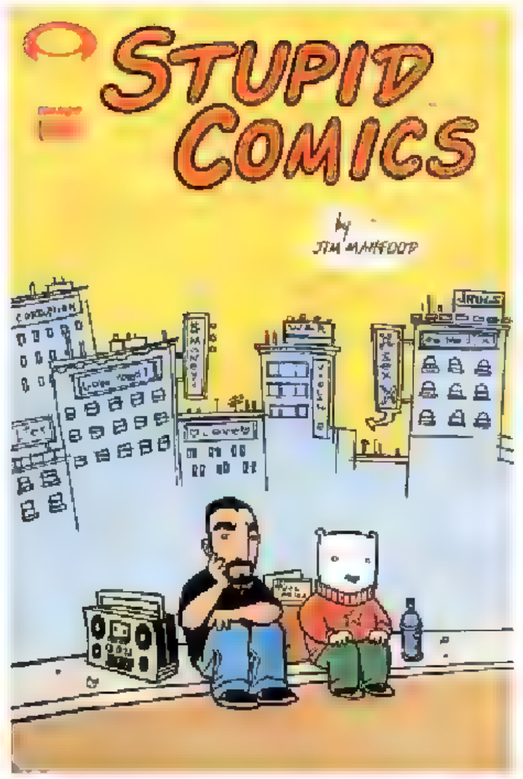
Hurtt's pencilling and panel composition rarely puts a foot wrong, yet I'm unconvinced that the grey-tone finishes provided by Dela Cruz have done much other than hindered the look of the book. It's not badly done, but absolutely everything has a grey effect, with little or no white shining through; this gives the book an overcast, homogenised look that really inflicts on Hurtt's pencils a blandness they don't manage to overcome. Dela Cruz is also the letterer, and he doesn't seem to realise that his lettering appears to be on scale with the artwork; hence a larger panel has a larger font size in its speech balloons. That's fine for splash pages, but on pages that have eight panels you really have to squint to read the words.

The Verdict: An unresolved, unexplored concept mars an effectively written thriller, while the artwork is muddied by poor toning and tiny lettering. (AC)

Stupid Comics #1

By Jim Mahfood

Image



It needs to be said: Image is by far the most interesting of the Big American Publishers these days. They're still stuck with the appalling reputation they gained early on, as the publisher most likely to bring you distorted superhero art and semi-literate scripting, but they're making a lot of good moves to try and shuck that rep, trying out all kinds of projects and approaches. OK, so perhaps it's a bit like throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks - but the outcome is a house with a much more adventurous, experimental edge than Marvel or DC can manage.

Mahfood's work, for example, would seem to belong more naturally at Fantagraphics or Top Shelf... or, 30 years ago, at Last Gasp, since it consists of his personal, satirical view of present day culture and pulls no punches. The targets he aims at are rather what you'd expect of a left wing Angry Young Man; cell phones, MTV, Catholic upbringing, infringement of civil liberties, retro fashion movements, the whole confused melange of the significant and the trivial which makes up modern pop culture. But if the targets are predictable, he skewers them accurately, amusingly and with finely savage cartooning. The result may never change anything, but it works very nicely as a good cathartic read.

And I promise you, there are no balloon breasts or implausible heroic posturing to be found in these pages! Just good ol' underground comix, 2002 style.

The Verdict: Mahfood is a malcontent with a lot to say – and all credit to Image for giving him a mass-distributed format in which to say it. (MK)

Transformers: Armada #3

By Chris Sarracini and James Raiz

Dreamwave

Unfortunately, this title takes a definite step backwards in terms of quality with the introduction of some cute child sidekicks for the mini Transformers. Not only do such characters never work in terms of narrative, coming off as at best twee and at worst dangerously annoying, but artist James Raiz shows that he just isn't very good at drawing people. His Transformers are superb, but his pseudomanga-styled humans are rather amateurish, with some clumsy anatomy and strange positioning. Chris Sarracini also fails to redeem the human characters through his writing, making them bland, generic and above all infuriating. Given that most of the action this month concerns the trio of annoying brats and there is little Transformer action, this issue is something of a disappointment. The few Cybertronian scenes are quite good, which makes me hope that the final page cliffhanger leads to a child-free series from now on!

The Verdict: Until the cute child sidekicks improve/go away/die, I cannot recommend this. (KG)

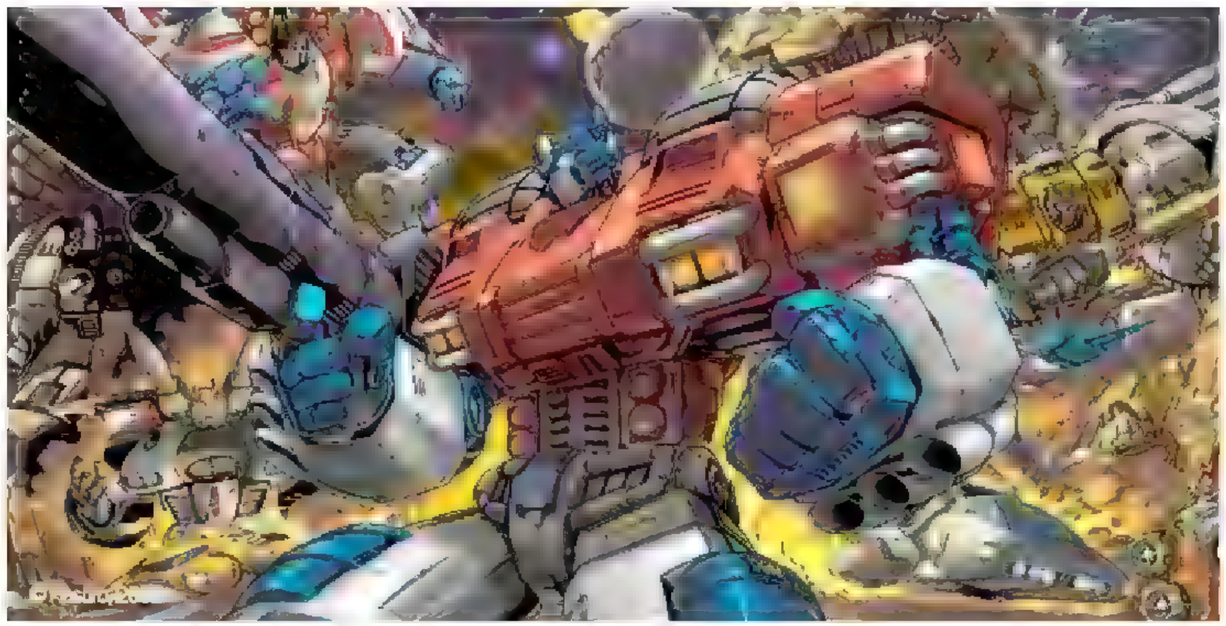
Transformers: The War Within #1

By Simon Furman and Don Figueroa

Dreamwave

Another appearance of the classic '80s licence, this time set, prior to the Transformers' crash-landing on Earth, on the Transformers home-world of Cybertron. With a story by Marvel UK's regular Transformers scribe Simon Furman, this comic probably has the best credentials for being a hit with old time Transformers readers. While it would be nice to say that other people will care, this comic is purely for fans of the originals, or kids who are just getting into the toy robots. With the pre-Earth setting, the Transformers look that bit different, their Cybertronian (dear God, I feel old saying that) forms having a more "space age" quality. The art is pretty good, mixing the clunky forms of Pat Lee's approach with that of those original Marvel series, but now with added chunkiness - Figueroa's robots have broader shoulders, giving them a tougher look. The story is, well, okay really - nothing special, even though it deals with how Optimus becomes holder of the Matrix (Martin Shipp was right with his Target: 2006 review, you really do have to have been there).

The Verdict: Classic? No. Good? Maybe. Not one for non-fans of the mature variety. (KH)



World Class Comics #1

By Various Creators

Image/Big Bang Comics

Big Bang Comics is the fan imprint that made it into the majors, has hung on there for a decade, yet still remains entirely true to its fan roots. Judging by mastermind Gary Carlson's notes in this issue, it's only just hanging in there these days, though. A shortage of suitable fan artists is referred to, the regular title has been replaced by these occasional one-shots (the issue number is purely nominal), and the readers are canvassed for opinions on whether more modern stories should be tried out instead of Golden and Silver Age homages.

It's to be hoped that things will stay as they are. Most of the homages are blindingly obvious - Dr Stellar = the original Starman, Vita-Man = Hourman, Mr. Martian = J'onn J'onzz, and so on - and the drawing standards wouldn't have made it into any pro US comicbooks after about 1946; but those things are precisely what the fun is all about. Big Bang may forever have to cope with a small, and shrinking, audience for crude, enthusiastic stabs at the crude, enthusiastic comicbook styles of the WW2 era, but for those who get the nostalgic joke this is pure, unalloyed fun, unhampered by anything like depth or characterisation. And there isn't a lot of that kind of fun to be found in superhero comics these days. Make no demands of a comic like this, and it'll put a big smile on your face. That's what I call a recommendation!

The Verdict: For unassuming and cheerful retro fun, nostalgic middle-aged comics fans would be hard put to beat this. (MK)

Transmetropolitan #60

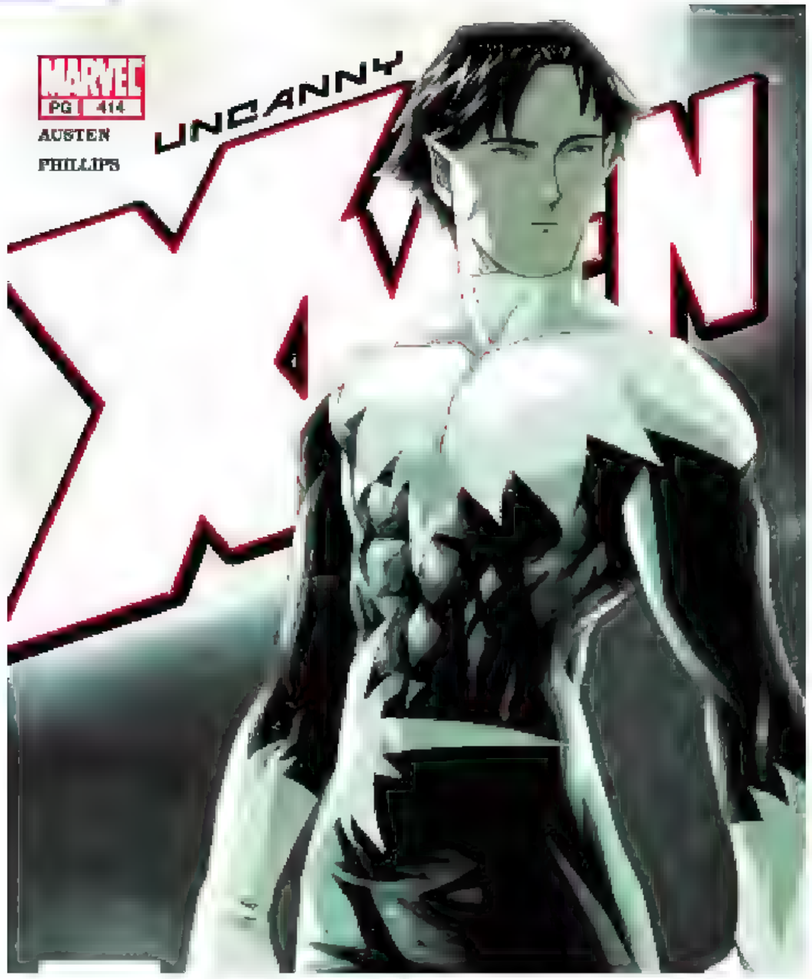
By Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson

Vertigo

Well, I'm glad that's over; I always loathe those love/hate relationships that are impossible to end, particularly when you can see the other party about to finish it for you. And I'm glad Ellis has stopped, because sixty issues has been a bit of a stretch, frankly. Forty issues of story and a decent artist/inker partnership and this could have been a classic in the making, instead of a rather bloated attempt at satirical SF which gives the distinct impression that inker Rodney Ramos only owns two pens and one of them is fucked.

It doesn't help that Robertson apologises for drawing entire issues "...in three days." I was wondering why this had been quite easily the shittiest-looking rag on the shelves between Todd McFarlane's retirment and DK2 coming out, and now I know. What is one to make of the assertion that "Even when it seemed I wasn't giving it my all any more, I truly was"? I'll remember that for next time: "I'm sorry this column is shite, Mr Editor, but it's the best I can do." Good grief... Try to bow out with some pride, lads, eh?

The Verdict: A triumphant epilogue to what has been a brave, flawed stab at an intelligent and unique SF comic, somewhat marred by a tired and maudlin editorial. (AC)



Uncanny X-Men #414
By Chuck Austen and Sean Phillips
Marvel

Damn. Damn and blast. When Austen was announced as the new Uncanny scribe, I was disheartened. None of his previous Marvel work had impressed me - if anything, I can't stand his work. But, damn. This is a good issue. No doubt about it. Northstar guest stars, and Austen scripts him well, giving him all of the arrogance he should have, but without the tedious over-written French-Canadian accent. It's difficult having a comic that is nearly all about Northstar without touching on his homosexuality, and so predictably Austen builds this into the story - that of the X-Men discovering a new mutant near to where Northstar resides. Austen's handling of Jean-Paul's sexuality is excellent, with no in-your-face grandstanding, but instead a sensitive view of a man who is near enough a minority of one. There's little to complain about regarding this issue - it's well structured, Sean Phillips is on his usual form, and Austen does a good job of injecting emotional content into the story, without it becoming overly sentimental.
The Verdict: A quiet, and superb issue that balances well with the big-budget antics of Morrison's New X-Men. (KH)

Wolverine #181
By Frank Tieri and Sean Chen
Marvel

This one issue is the only Frank Tieri-written issue that has been remotely readable. It deals with Wolvie in civvies, and involves a dispute of a non-X-Men nature. The story is okay, although I can't help thinking that I might have read a very similar Wolverine story before - but he's become that kind of character, with recycling of previous stories being ridiculously common place. Chen's artwork picks up this issue, most likely thanks to Palmer's inks - gone is the scratchy finishing style of Norm Rapmund. There's not much else to say about it - it's an okay issue, with okay art. Its main saving grace is that it isn't bloody awful, like most of Tieri and Chen's Wolverine issues.
The Verdict: Nothing special. (KH)

X-Statix #3
By Peter Milligan and Michael Allred
Marvel

As per usual, this comic is a clever mix of superhero comic cliché and satirical comment on that cliché. This month, the X-Statix team begins to fall apart due to internal tensions, a standard superhero premise given the Milligan and Allred twist.

The beauty of this title is the way that the more conventional elements are so well done, with the satirical edge bubbling along underneath. It is the conventional elements that push through to the fore this time, with an exciting and action-packed plot, and a wonderful cliffhanger ending, brilliantly realised by Mike Allred's art. That said, the subtler elements hint at some interesting ideas cropping up in future issues. A truly superb comic.
The Verdict: Marvel's best title - and one of the best superhero comics available anywhere. (KG)

THE VERDICT

COLLECTED EDITION

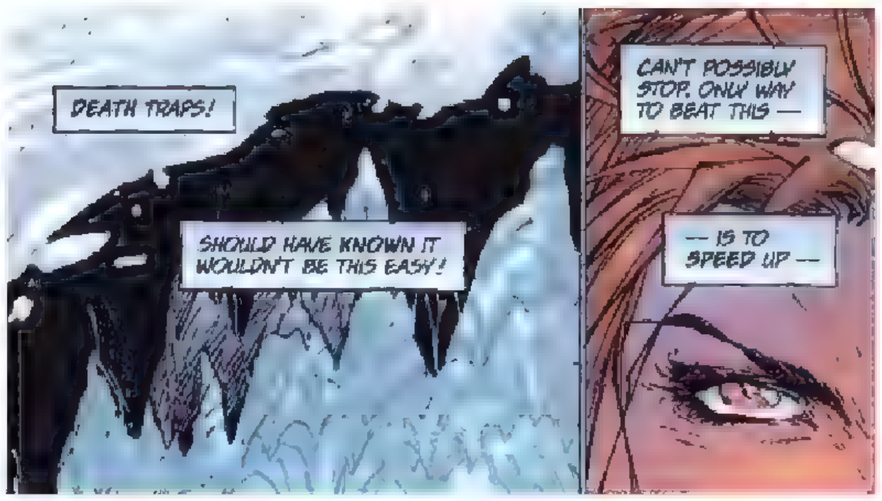
Tomb Raider: Chasing Shangri-La
By Dan Jurgens and Various Artists
Top Cow

Transformers: Dark Designs
By Simon Furman and Various Artists
Marvel/Titan Books

These two are reviewed together because they have a few things in common.

First, both are collections of monthly series comics, so new readers are to some extent going to be dropped in on an ongoing story. The Tomb Raider volume contains two complete stories with no cliffhanger ending, so it reads well enough as an integral book. The Transformers one reprints half of a 1993 limited series and stops dead in the middle of the plot; some may consider £14.99 for an incomplete story to be a poor deal.

More significantly, both volumes collect comics based on characters licensed from other media - a computer game, a line of toys - with no particular narrative content. This presents considerable problems that neither Jurgens nor Furman appear to have overcome. The *Tomb Raider* game requires the player to steer heroine Lara Croft through sequences of death traps in search of an archaeological treasure, which at least amounts to a narrative of sorts; but where pitfalls and problems require no rationale in the game because they're the *point* of it, in a comic some kind of explanation of them seems necessary. You won't find it here, though. In the second story in Chasing Shangri-La, Croft and her confederate Chase Carver are at one point attacked by a superhumanly powerful conquistador, for whose existence and appearance no explanation whatsoever is given. Later in the story Carver unleashes corrosive gases in a Mayan temple then discovers Croft battling animated skeletons; again, these phenomena are left unexplained. Oddly enough, this kind of thing happened all the time in 1960s comics, but in a modern story which is depicted in a hyper-realistic style and filled with character interaction, it's pretty jarring.

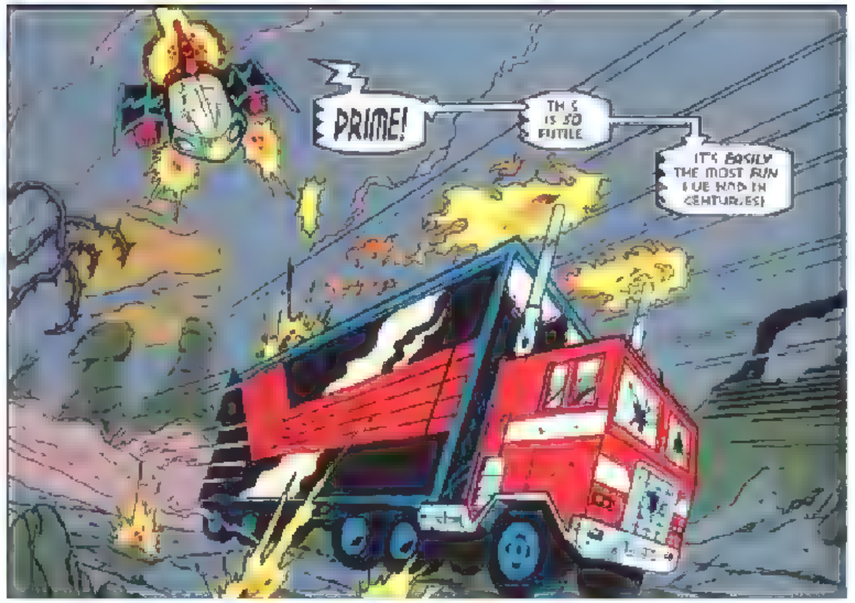


She *should* have known - death traps is what *Tomb Raider* is all about.

The analogous problem with Transformers is that it's based on a line of toys designed to be folded by kids into either the shapes of robots or of vehicles or animals. In Furman's storyline the robots are an alien race engaged in a galactic battle between good robots and bad robots - consequently such frequent events as the appearance of, for example, a large goods van racing across the surface of an alien planet are, frankly, merely laughable.

It would be unfair to blame either author for these problems (although Jurgens is culpable of at least one extremely weak piece of plotting in the first part of Chasing Shangri-La); product licensors such as Hasbro (Transformers) or Eidos (Tomb Raider) tend to insist that stories or films based on their products display the original qualities of those products as often and as accurately as possible. In these two cases, though, the outcome isn't exactly very coherent or satisfying comics.

But the final thing these two have in common is that such considerations may be entirely irrelevant. Both comics series are really intended for children or for the nostalgic, not for critically-minded adult readers. And children love them; at a comics day run by a media centre a couple of months ago I saw what is nowadays a very unusual sight, groups of small children searching through boxes of reduced price comics, and what they were pulling out and buying time and time again were back issues of Tomb Raider. Thanks to the nostalgia market, Transformers back issues aren't in the sale bins any longer - but had they been I'm sure the kids would have been snapping them up too. Children no longer read comics – even Spider-Man, Superman and Batman are obscure figures to those whose parents aren't comics fans - but they all know *Tomb Raider* and Transformers. And while one might prefer to introduce the comics readers of tomorrow to the likes of America's Best Comics, if a taste for spinoffs from favourite toys and games serves to introduce them to the medium, then more power to such spin-offs!



Transformers: Lorries in Outer Space

One thing these two collections conspicuously don't have in common is art style. Tomb Raider is all very mid '90s Image-style, drawn by lots of people who used to work for Rob Liefeld's various imprints, immaculately glossy and Photoshopped. Transformers is early '90s Marvel, four colour letterpress stuff, rather angular and hard to follow due to both the designs and the apparently infinite multiplicity of the characters. Neither style is particularly to my taste - but then it must be transparently obvious by now that neither of these comics is my kind of thing.

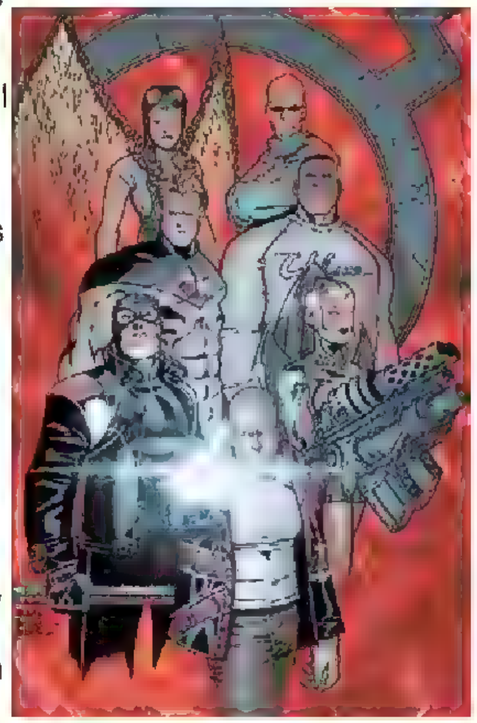
The Verdict: If I had to read either of these books again it would probably be Tomb Raider - the art is slightly easier on the eyes. But it's far more likely that I'll be passing my copies on to a local playgroup or primary school. (MK)

The Authority: Transfer of Power

By Mark Millar, Tom Peyer and various artists
Wildstorm

Well, this is something of a pleasant surprise. I had thought that the Authority concept had run out of steam during Mark Millar's second story arc, and that the various fill-ins and delays that marred the stories in this collection would only make things worse. In actual fact this is a fairly decent superhero yarn which, while softer edged than is really appropriate for the title, does remain true to the spirit of Warren Ellis' creation in many ways. The writing is light-hearted and contains little of the fire evident in previous stories, but is competent enough. The shameless editorial censorship imposed upon Millar's final arc smothers the angry indignant feeling of his Authority writing, but enough remains to keep this apart as the black sheep of the superhero family. Tom Peyer's fill-in story is little more than fluff, but it is done reasonably well, and he gives the replacement Authority enough character for readers to identify with them and enjoy the story. Dustin Nguyen's art is attractive in a chunky, blocky way and tells the story well. Elsewhere the art is a slightly scrappy mix of styles, with Frank Quitely, Arthur Adams and Gary Erskine all illustrating parts of Millar's last tale. The result is a fragmented and bitty look, which doesn't help the story flow, although individually each artist does a good job. All in all, this is actually a better purchase than the previous volume, although it pales in comparison with the earlier, angrier and cooler storylines.

The Verdict: The Authority might have lost its teeth, but decent writing and unforgettable characters make this enjoyable, even without its trademark bite. (KG)



Buffy: Death of Buffy

By Tom Fassbender, Jim Pascoe, Fabian Nicieza, Cliff Richards and Paul Lee
Titan Books

One of the better Buffy collections, this bridges the gap between TV seasons five and six, following the slayer's friends and family as they come to terms with her death and prepare for her resurrection. The opening story is the strongest thing here - indeed, one of the best Buffy comics I've read - concentrating on Dawn's reaction and a demon that feeds on tragedy and mourning. It actually feels like a missing episode of the TV show, with plot serving the characters and not vice versa. Even the script manages some nice moments of Buffy-speak, while the artists for once set storytelling over photo-realism. It's downhill from there, with the second story trying too hard to over-explain plot points which are adequately covered at the start of Season 6 and a back-up strip that leaps forward to the middle of the next season and therefore seems out of place and unnecessary.

The Verdict: A faithful bridging episode padded with a little too much filler. (RH)

Catwoman: Dark End of the Street

By Ed Brubaker, Darwyn Cooke, Cameron Stewart and Mike Allred
DC/Titan Books

Writing Catwoman must be like a dream date for Ed Brubaker. Here he gets to flirt with all his previous loves - hardboiled detective fiction, slice-of-life drama/comedy and Lowlife-style characters who live on the washed-out streets between good and evil - whilst also wooing the sexiest comicbook anti-heroine in the world. For years, writers have struggled to find a direction for Selina Kyle, casting her as everything from femme fatale to reluctant heroine, Robin Hood to Norma Bates. Brubaker quickly lays this to rest with a four-part prologue featuring Chandleresque gumshoe Slam Bradley's investigation into Selina's convoluted backstory, tying up loose ends from the previous series (for those who care) whilst more importantly re-establishing the character's mystique and the corrupt Gotham City setting. Then it's into the first story proper, a murder mystery that highlights Selina's new role as defender of the disenfranchised. It's a clever move that gives her a reason to remain in Gotham - a town that otherwise probably doesn't need another vigilante. "That's my territory," she explains to Batman, "in between right and wrong. Which is a place you can never go." And, as is becoming the norm these day, the Dark Knight himself works much better in a supporting role than he does in the spotlight.

The perfect complement to Brubaker's noirish writing is the art - Darwyn Cooke cramming multiple panels of simple yet effective detail (crooked skylines and newspaper blown back streets) onto every page without ever overcrowding the eye. The effect is a wonderfully smooth, almost kinetic read with not a line wasted. And his cartoon-slinky take on Catwoman herself is far sexier than any of the other impossibly-constructed badgirls out there.

Brubaker's writing is the real draw here though: from the punch-drunk narrative of Slam Bradley to the sympathetic portrayal of a tragic killer, along the way he touches on matters of male/female relationships, sex and identity that are rarely dealt with in mainstream superhero books.

The Verdict: A dream date for Ed Brubaker... and for fans of dark, intelligent super-hero/crime comics everywhere. (RH)

Fantastic Four: 1 2 3 4

By Grant Morrison and Jae Lee

Marvel

Despite headline-grabbing rumours of four-in-a-bed incest, Grant Morrison's take on Marvel's first family is surprisingly respectful to Lee/Kirby tradition, yet also provides that curious mix of skewed "real world" perspective and sci-fi-on-drugs weirdness at which this writer excels. So it begins on Yancy Street, leading quickly into a chess game confrontation involving Dr. Doom, Namor and the Mole Man, ripping the team apart through their own personality flaws - Ben's self-loathing, Johnny's impulsiveness, Sue's libido ("Why does everybody think I'm obsessed with Namor's body!?") and Reed's "subtle autism". It's an old-fashioned "divide and conquer" plot hidden beneath subtle character moments: a neglected Sue moaning that "the bathroom skylight got cracked by the Gray Gargoyle" whilst crying visible tears; Reed's brain proving itself the most elastic part of his body; Ben looking for things to hit to take his mind off his misery.

Jae Lee's art also reflects this meeting of the classic and the modern, his own watercolour-and-ink style flashing moments of Kirby and - less expectedly - Steranko. It works well, providing a suitable backdrop for Morrison's forays into the poetic ("green glass submarines gliding through undersea palaces made of phosphor and jewellery") and the theatrical (Sue's final confrontation with Doom - "Stop trying to hurt us, you stupid, lonely, ignorant man.").

The Verdict: The best take on the Fantastic Four we've seen in a long time... let's hope the rumours of Morrison's Ultimate FF turn out to be true. (RH)

Goddess

By Garth Ennis and Phil Winslade

DC-Vertigo/Titan Books

At the height of his Preacher fame Garth Ennis wrote Goddess, the story of Rosie Nolan, a zookeeper who finds herself the bearer of psychic abilities so powerful that, on first use, they cause an earthquake which splits Scotland from England and sends it 100 miles north. Looked at now, Goddess is a template for the direction Ennis' writing would take post-Preacher, and fans of his work on Punisher and Fury will lap this up, whilst everyone else may want to proceed with caution. Subtlety has no place here - this is a book of exploding heads, stapled testicles and prodigious streams of blood, vomit and excrement. The stock characters will be instantly familiar to Ennis-ites too - from the sadistic CIA agent, Harry Nooks, and his blubbering, ineffectual sidekick, the hilariously-monickered Dick Limpcock... to the "cool dude" action hero rebel, Mudhawk, and his "pathetic loser made good" mate, Jeff. As is usually the case, Ennis displays much more imagination when writing female characters, and Rosie Nolan joins Preacher's Tulip, Hellblazer's Kit and Hitman's Sgt. Tiegel in this regard - she's definitely the best thing about this book.

Only in the closing chapters does Ennis veer drastically away from type, floundering momentarily in the "mystical/religious cobblers" territory of Neil Gaiman or Marc DeMatteis before blasting back into much more familiar graphic (and I do mean graphic) battlefield violence. Which brings us to the art - deliciously and disgustingly detailed work from Phil Winslade that's coloured with the same disregard for subtlety as Ennis' script. It's either obscenely beautiful or beautifully obscene... a shame they decided to reprint this collection on flimsy carbon-copy paper.

The Verdict: Gory, gaudy and puerile in the extreme. If that sounds good to you, either get help... or buy this book. (RH)

Hellboy: Wake The Devil / Conqueror Worm

By Mike Mignola

Dark Horse/Titan Books

Continuing to fill our bookshelves with Hellboy in time for the movie, here are another two collections packed with European castles, monster Nazis, aliens and apocalypse. The most noticeable thing about these more recent stories is how much Mike Mignola is growing as a writer, now eager to make Hellboy grow as a character rather than just letting him be dragged into yet another "cataclysm of the week" adventure. So in *Wake The Devil*, we finally learn the truth behind Hellboy's sawn-off horns (and his repressed destiny) while he struggles to prevent the resurrection of a legendary vampire. Then *Conqueror Worm*, probably the most accomplished Hellboy yet, sees him team up with Roger the Homunculus (best name for a comic book character since Danny The Street) to prevent a giant space worm from turning us all into reptiles, then devouring everything in its path. Mignola ups the absurd this time, but maintains an almost-straight face throughout, providing a context in which lines like "There is no escaping the worm!" become both hilarious and frightening - no mean feat. The development of his writing also means that obvious plot signposts are ignored in favour of more unpredictable routes. His art, meanwhile, is becoming less detailed yet somehow more creepy. Fans of his earlier, more detailed, work may not like the change, but he's reached that point where he can tell an effective story with the minimum of brush strokes, casting gothic shadows on every page.

The Verdict: Dark, witty, exciting and absurd - the strongest Hellboy adventures to date. (RH)

Trenches

By Scott Mills
Top Shelf

The author of Big Clay Pot returns with a new graphic novel, depicting the events around the First World War. It seems to me that Mills' theme is brothers - whether they be brothers by blood, or brothers in arms, united in battle - as he charts the lives of the Allenby brothers and their commanding officer, Hemmingway, from recruitment through to the battle of the Somme. But this is no linear narrative; instead, Mills punctuates the forward motion of the story at intervals with flashbacks, providing insight into the characters, before pressing on towards the inevitability of the Somme.

Mills adopts a loose four panel grid layout for the book, and a sketchy, but atmospheric art style, using solid areas of shadow and zipatone sparingly to good effect, and the decision to substitute a dark shade of brown ink for black gives it a muddy, sepia-like quality which works well.

Thankfully, Mills uses his research in the best possible manner - to inform a personal story, rather than regurgitate historical fact upon the page.

The Verdict: A deceptively quick read, but repeated viewings reveal a great deal of depth below the surface. A bit like a trench, you see? (JE)

GOOD COP – BAD COP

Superman: Our Worlds At War Vol. 1 & 2
By Various Creators
DC/Titan Books

I tried very hard to like this and in the end I decided to call it a draw, with entertainment marginally the winner.

Having been away from Superman and DC in general for a few years this seemed a perfect opportunity to jump back on the bandwagon. The problem was, so much had happened that was reflected in this story that I spent a lot of my time confused and losing the plot.

Vol. One is essentially a reworking of Crisis on Infinite Earths. I kid you not, even down to the token deaths and the general feel and pace (and the female hero - Strange Visitor (?!?) - who sacrifices herself for the cause). This, however, isn't a bad thing. Some of the deaths are worthy of Barry Allen and the reader gets the impression that something is actually happening - which of course is a good thing and a bad thing.

The artwork throughout Vol. One is noteworthy.

Vol. Two goes on for far too long. The story should have been all but over and suddenly this second volume that should really have an impact is full of all the peripheral stories interspersed throughout. But the battle against Brainiac 13 and Warworld didn't have the same kind of menace and foreboding as the battle with Imperiex (who resembles one of Jack Kirby's Marvel-published Eternals). I was looking forward to the ending only because then it'd be over and done with.

One thing that did impress me was the feeling that the writers and artists had all, generally, been talking to each other. The story flowed better than any massive storyline I've read since the aforementioned Crisis and this is probably what saves it from becoming a complete flop.

The Verdict: Vol. One is fun. Vol. Two is poo. What to do? (Phil Hall is the Good Cop)

You all know the score by now: "big end of the world as we know it" crisis; the most dangerous threat to our existence since the last most dangerous threat to our existence; a bunch of characters killed off to prove we mean business; a sprawling crossover monster that puts big bangs above all else - especially plot logic and coherence.

Our Worlds At War is so loaded with universe-threatening bad guys - including Imperiex, Doomsday, Darkseid, General Zod and Brainiac - that we very quickly become numbed to their impact. Desperate to drive home the danger, the writers (including Joes Kelly and Casey, Jeph Loeb and Mark Schultz) crank up the death and destruction to the max. With a cry of "this time, it's WAR!" they splatter the story with clumsy biblical imagery (Superman parting a red sea) and Great Quotes from US Military History (which some readers may find rather inappropriate in the current global climate). It all sprawls out over 20+ issues, sacrificing tension, excitement and even common sense along the way. At times it's impossible to tell what's going on - the latest "death" of Aquaman being a prime example of a dramatic turning point so mishandled it seems even the writers don't fully understand what they've just done.

In fact, the one true achievement of OWAW is to finally make death utterly meaningless as a threat to the DC heroes. Superman? He's died before, and he came back. Wonder Woman? Ditto. Aquaman? Impulse? The Suicide Squad? You're cancelling their books, might as well cancel them for a while. Until its time to bring them back. Heck, Steel's death doesn't even last till the end of the story! Congratulations, guys – you just rendered the greatest threat of all completely impotent.

On the plus side then... a lot of splash- and double-page spreads allow the artists to show off (including Mike Wieringo, Phil Jiminez, Ed McGuinness – even Bill Sienkiewicz for a couple of pages), while Peter David manages to inject a little humour into proceedings... but not much.

The Verdict: The war to end all wars? Let's hope so. (Rol Hirst is the Bad Cop)

CLASSIC TRADE PAPERBACK

Uncle Sam

By Steve Darnall and Alex Ross
DC/Titan Books

In 1997 Vertigo put out one of the most intelligently subversive series ever to be published by one of the major US companies. It also contained what remains, five years later, Alex Ross's finest comics art. Mainstream media - the New York Times, the Village Voice, Kirkus Review and more - gave it very enthusiastic notices. The introduction for the trade collection was written by respected author and columnist Greil Marcus. The comics press didn't pay a great deal of attention to it. There must be a moral in there somewhere...

Perhaps it's that Darnall and Ross's version of Uncle Sam violated the sacred tenets of comic book continuity. He wasn't the Will Eisner-created Quality Comics hero, and not a member of his 1970s team the Freedom Fighters was to be seen. Instead, the authors cut through all that and went back to the original, the symbol of America's spirit most famously portrayed in Thomas Nast's illustration. Worse, they presented him not as an heroic figure but as a deranged hobo staggering around city streets, sleeping in alleyways, mumbling apparently lunatic fragments of quotes from American history and culture. And the story showed his gradual realisation of his identity and purpose, developing in between being tossed into gaol cells and set on fire by homeboy gangs.

It was a "state of the nation" story with a vengeance, and the state it outlined wasn't too good. As Sam reviews his memories of moments from American history, he concludes that the American dream asset out in the Declaration of Independence had been shattered by as early as 1786, and that everything since then had been merely a mouthing of ideals cloaking an edifice of intolerance, corruption and corporate empire building in which the people of America had no better role than as deluded, duped consumers. The ending relents somewhat, offering some possibility of hope and even framing that possibility within something like a superhero fight scene, but as a mainstream comic book it remains an unusual and disturbing experience.

Ross may have made his rep - and with it, the clout to get this old idea of his and his friend Darnall's published - painting superheroes realistically, but he's far better suited to material like this. Superheroics really don't need realism; it's a perk for the fans, a suggestion of fine art credibility, but most of the time it simply gets in the way of a definitively non-realistic genre. Uncle Sam, by contrast, is immeasurably enhanced by realism - it both grounds Darnall's often impressionistic writing and helps distract the reader from thinking of it as yet another fantasy. Moreover, it offers far more scope and challenge in terms of setting and depictions than anything else Ross has tackled, and the pages virtually shout out the glee with which he takes on and masters those challenges. The man is good - one wishes he more often had the chance to really show it.

The USA has changed a great deal since 1997, and it may be that Uncle Sam is no longer considered a palatable experience – I wouldn't be surprised if it's no longer in print. Or perhaps the accounts of the Enron debacle render it invalid now; but can such news be repeated too often?

The Verdict: In the current era, this book should be required reading in America. But you'll probably have to search remainder shops or bargain bins to find it. (MK)

ZINE SEEN

Armageddon Patrol #4

By John A. Short and Alex Paterson
($2.99/£2.30 for a US format comic, from Alchemy Texts, 20 Grants Avenue, Boumemouth BH1 4NR, England)

It's been a couple of years since the last appearance of John Short's Vietnam war series; apparently much of the time has been spent searching for a new artist, and the wait has certainly been worth it. Alex Paterson turns in a very smooth, completely professional job here, showing a lot of Mort Drucker influences - which fits the idiom just fine, given that Drucker was a top notch war comics artist for years before he settled down to drawing TV and film spoofs for Mad Magazine.

This issue is nominally billed as a "Maiden America Special", focussing on the patriotic superheroine created during the award-winning Octobriana series of a few years ago – but Short has moved the character some distance away from her origins, transforming her into a hard nosed, gung-ho US soldier who will unhesitatingly kill innocent Americans if that's what Uncle Sam needs. It's hardly a sympathetic character, but that's not required; this is a war comic set in a dirty, corrupt war zone, and Short's story captures the nastiness of it all very effectively. If he and Paterson can get the issues coming out more regularly, this already impressive series could well go places.

The Verdict: Powerful scripting and intense, stylish art add up to a fine study of the brutishness of life during wartime. (MK)

Fleep

By Jason Shiga
Sparkplug Comics

This is an extraordinary work, if you can find it. Printed with a black and white, unadorned cover, and with ink-washed interiors, it's the sort of thing that appears on the shelves unannounced and should really intrigue you into buying it.

Jimmy Yee walks into a phone booth to call his girlfriend, later waking up

after a mysterious blackout to find that he's trapped on all sides by solid concrete. He only has enough change to make three calls, but the denominations on the coins have changed, as has the language in the phonebook, and the sign on the outside of the phone booth now reads "Fleep". Using various types of mathematical ingenuity, Jimmy works out exactly where on the globe he is and sets about freeing himself. Except that the one thing he thinks he knew - himself - isn't the strongest base from which to start.

Shiga was once a maths genius until suffering a mental breakdown, followed by institutionalisation. There he made comics until - according to my research - he died in 1991. Don't ask me, I only work here...

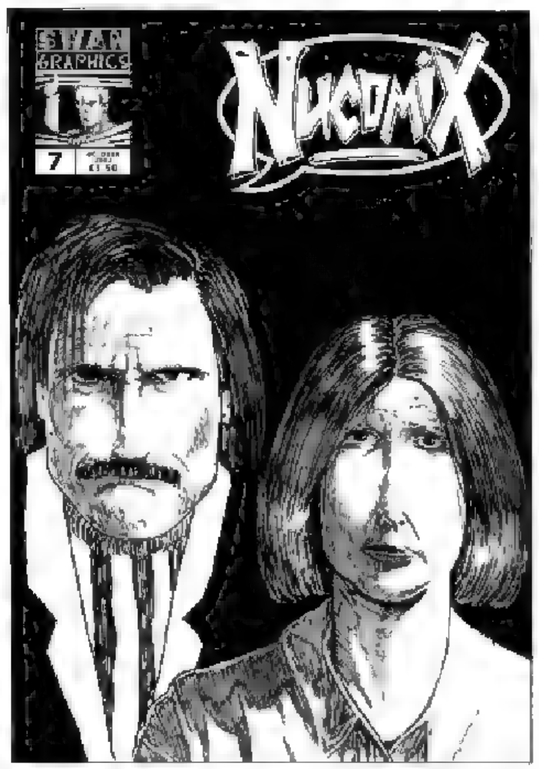
The format of Fleep (6" by 9") allows Shiga to work in an unfettered arrangement of two tiers of three panels each, which paces the story very nicely, leaving the artist to work on more complicated concerns, such as how to make a comic set in a phone booth visually interesting. The incredibly simple line drawing, although leavened by a wonderful control of ink tones, is masterfully executed and the writing style is witty, educational and so understated that every time the story twists into something different it will have happened before you know it.

The Verdict: A masterpiece. (AC)

Nucomix #7

(£1.50 for 24 A4 black and white pages from Simon Bowland, 7 Waterside Close, Madeley, Cheshire CW3 9TH, England)

This monthly British small press anthology title is a real mixed bag. On the plus side there's *The Activist* and *Eccentrix*. The former is set in a sleepy village suddenly invaded by a government clean-up crew, dressed in Haz Chem suits. *The Activist*'s protagonist – "practising witch and would-be environmental activist", Jade Durrant – is both likeable and believable, while the strip's art is clear and clean, although a little awkward looking at times. An involving, enjoyable story from writer Rik Hoskin.

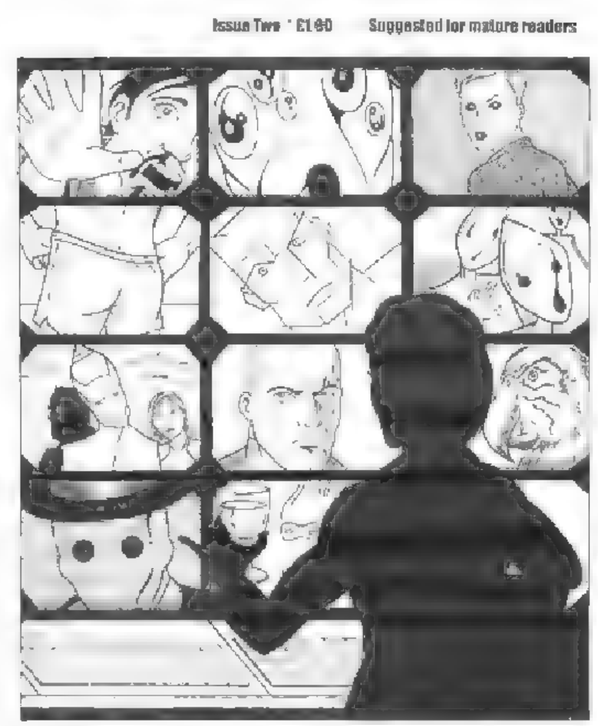


Eccentrix is another Hoskin-penned tale. A young woman - who might be the reincarnation of long-dead Russian dictator Joseph Stalin - meets a mysterious man, known only as Two-Nine-Seven, while in a mental asylum. They escape, during which Two-Nine-Seven displays extraordinary powers. This is original, unpredictable stuff that draws you in and really makes you care what happens next.

Unfortunately, the other two strips don't hit quite the same heights. *Piranha* is the story of an amnesiac assassin in Japan on a mission to expose a secret organisation called The Mission. The story's a little impenetrable but fun, while the art is scrappy but quite dynamic in places. Not bad.

The final strip, *Slayhunter*, leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth. What could have been a diverting tale about what happens to the 'Hunter's old school friend when he falls on hard times is spoiled by a nasty scene involving the murder of a naked female kidnap victim. It's all a bit gratuitous, to be honest with you.

The Verdict: Two decent, solid stories; two more that are a little disappointing. Let's call it a comic of two halves. (AW)



Pest Control #2

(£1.35 for 24 B4 pages, from Grant Springford, 2 Cawston Court, Highland Road, Bromley BR1 4AF, UK)

There's a "thank you" for feedback to O Men creator Martin Eden in this issue's indicia – and, yes, Pest Control takes a rather similar approach to O Men. A reluctant, angst-ridden modern superteam, veteran heroes with bad memories of former teams, powerful and mentally disturbed psychics, fractured narrative devices... it's all rather familiar.

Yet I don't think it's just imitative. For one thing Springford is a rather sharper artist than Eden, filling out his panels with thinly lined detail which helps to establish a unique and personal style. For another, it seems to me that there's an increasingly shared approach to superhero narratives being demonstrated here, a kind of British small press "school" rather than mere copying.

In any case, Springford's book is a fairly complex and enjoyable read, not something you can flip through casually, and not something that relies on tired, overly familiar tactics. There are places where the art doesn't quite match up to the ambition it suggests, but this creator has got a *lot* better in the last few years, and if he keeps at it he could be spearheading a new kind of storytelling in the pro scene in time.

The Verdict: The edges are still rough, but the promise comes closer to being fulfilled all the time. (MK)

Tales from the Mortuary

(£1.50 from Chris Askham, Big Man Comics, 9 Balmoral Grove, Colwick, Nottingham NG4 2GB, UK)

I've watched Chris Askham develop as an artist over the last decade and I now proclaim him good enough to work with the big boys. Together with some witty and original scripts from Arthur (Cargoculture) Wyatt this is a real treat and one that could quite easily benefit from being repackaged in a more conventional (i.e. professional) way.

Comedy horror either works well or it sucks big time - and these guys pull it off and with some aplomb. It looks nice. It reads well and it's a lot of (sick) fun. Two people to watch out for now that the Brits are no longer top dogs in the USA. These guys could change a few opinions.

The Verdict: A quality product, highly recommended. (PH)

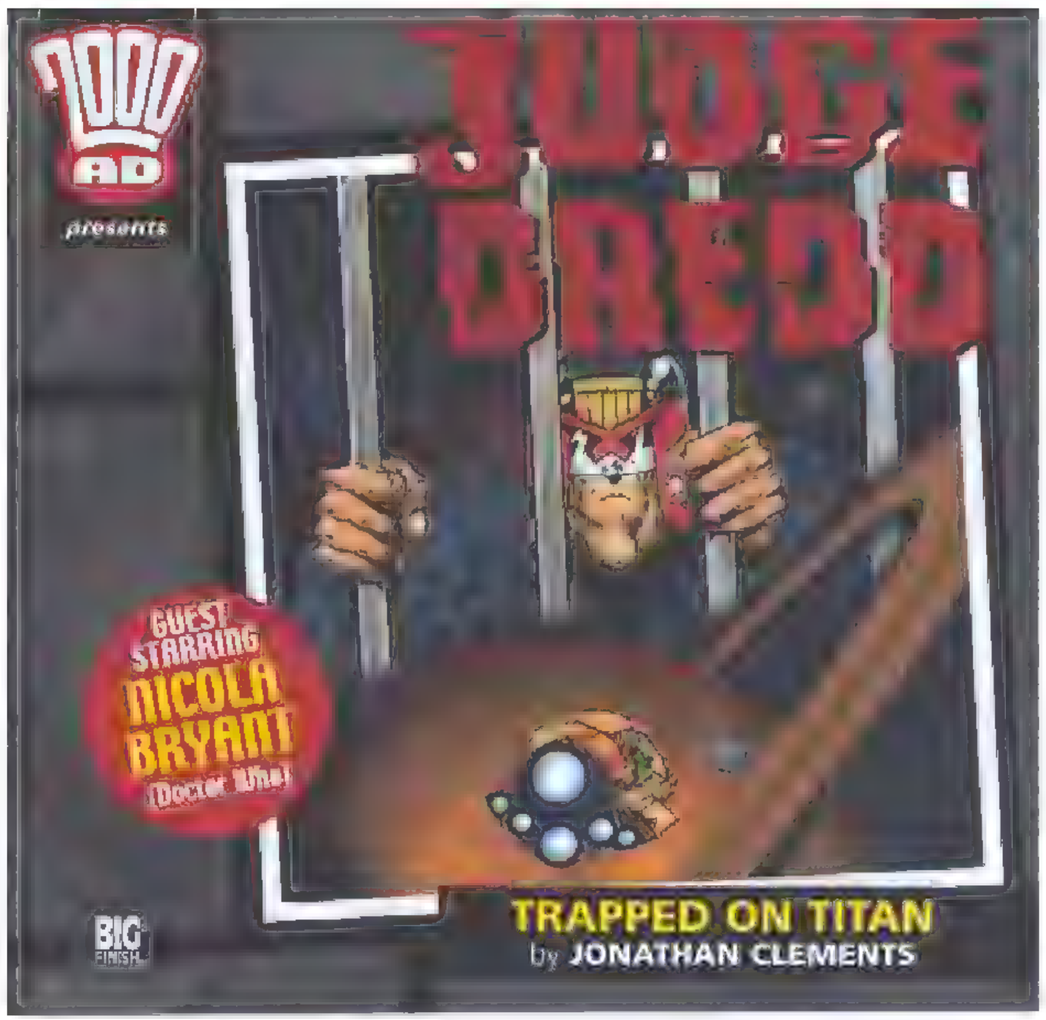
Valentine #8

By Daniel Cooney and A. David Lewis
Red Eye Press
(order from http://www.redeyepress.net)

Books about feisty female assassins are ten a penny these days, but Valentine is enormously different to the bounteously-busted, gun-happy, bad-assed babe books we've seen and soon wearied of elsewhere. For a start, the book's titular character, Dana Valentine, is an involving, complex character, whose life has been both dismal and brutal. Wrongly charged with the murder of her parents at 19, imprisoned as a result and then recruited and trained as an assassin by the CIA, Valentine tells the story of an intelligent, beautiful and hugely resourceful young woman who, nevertheless, lost control of her life somewhere along the way and is paying for it again and again. She wants a bit of peace and quiet and the chance to sort out the myriad demons in her head, but it's clear that her history and those involved in it are never going to allow that to happen. Okay, so it isn't the most original premise in the world, but it's carried out with such aplomb, by writers Dan Cooney (story) and A. David Lewis (script), that Valentine feels fresh and new rather than clichéd and old hat.

Lewis recently proved himself a fine storyteller in the first issue of his own book, Mortal Coils (which gets a five-page preview in this issue of Valentine and was reviewed in Borderline last month), and he does so again here. Lewis has a great ear for dialogue, a real talent for building tension and the ability to get us quickly inside the heads of his characters and - just as importantly – make us care about them. He isn't afraid to take risks in the way he handles the narrative either. There's a section towards the end of this issue where we realise, through a number of panels focusing in on a fairly wordy and involved psychiatric report, just how much Dana has been though and how much her mental state has suffered as a result. A blood and thunder shoot-out preceded it. In other hands such a sudden change of pace could have killed the story stone dead; in this case it expertly sets up a cruelly efficient cliffhanger for next issue.

Unfortunately, the art doesn't quite hit the heights of the script, the main problem being that Cooney's pencils are inked by three different people. That lends Valentine a slightly uneven and erratic look that doesn't detract too much from the story, but might put off the curious casual buyer flipping through an issue before deciding whether to purchase. In mitigation, though, the cover's great. The Verdict: Buy this, then save your pennies for the Valentine trade paperback (collecting the first six issues) coming in February 2003. (AW)



AUDIO BOOK

2000AD Presents #6
Judge Dredd: Trapped On Titan
Big Finish Productions (www.bigfinish.com)
Written by Jonathan Clements
Directed by John Ainsworth

After Clements' last turn, on the *Strontium Dog* audio-prog *Down To Earth*, I was very much looking forward to this CD, but I have to confess to being a little disappointed by the result. Where Clements' love for the *Strontium Dog* strip shone from the earlier story, unfortunately it seems evident that he doesn't feel the same about Dredd. While the script is entertaining enough, it's not the world of Dredd we're used to. The conceit of the story is that Titan, the prison colony that has always been known as the place they send corrupt Judges to, is under new management. The new regime has a spin-doctor approach, with guards as "redcoats" and prisoners designated "residents". In order to make a profit, Titan now accepts prisoners of any stripe, leading to a surplus of novelty accents, from Emerald Isle and Calhab Sector (formerly Ireland and Scotland respectively). There's an amusing nod to fans of the HBO television series Oz, with the naming of the prison M-City (Sectors A through L having been destroyed previously), and the plot hinges precariously on the past exploits of Titan's most infamous former inmate, Dredd's clone brother Rico, in a puzzle which only Dredd can solve. The story does contain a lot of clever touches, and enjoyable dialogue, but occasionally slips up with out of character swear words such as "drek" and "piss". One of the charming aspects of the Dredd universe is the substitution for ordinary swear words of Mega City slang such as "Drokk" and "Stomm". Call me a traditionalist, but I don't think 20th Century cussing has any place in Mega City One. Oh, and there's a whopping continuity error, where Mega City 2 is described as having been destroyed during the Apocalypse War. A little more care with your fact-checking, chaps!
The Verdict: Enjoyable if you can keep your inner fanboy leashed... (JE)

MANGA REVIEWS

Cannon God Exaxxion #9

By Kenichi Sonoda

Dark Horse

The return of Sonoda's slick sci-fi series. The Exaxxion finally fires its cannon, to great effect. Sonoda switches easily between scenes, from our hero Gun to his nutty genius (and pervert) Grandfather, to the Riofaldian (Boo! Hiss!) command, and then to Gun's school. The Riofaldian occupation also turns nasty for Gun's schoolmates, with military forces - including a stylish looking robot in an overcoat - hunting for the person responsible for destroying their terminal drone. In case you haven't been paying attention to it, that happens to have been Gun in his powerful gunner suit... Oh, and there are some naked female androids - go figure.

The Verdict: With the possible exception of the large breasted androids, there should be more sci-fi as well created as this. (KH)

Chobits Vol #3

By Clamp

Tokyopop

More chivalrous actions by Hideki. Not only is he caring for the innocent persocom Chi, but he's helping his best friend elope with their school teacher, and trying to have a romance with a beautiful colleague of his. This volume has a nice mix of humour, romance, soul searching, and unusual philosophy - with the addition of two new, and very mysterious, characters. Clamp are doing a fine job of keeping the story moving, and slowly revealing more and more about Chi, and the other characters. To top it off, there are so many sweet moments that it's difficult to dislike this book.

The Verdict: Clamp continue to shine and deliver a nice story. (KH)

Dragon Ball Z Part 5 #10

By Akira Toriyama

Viz

The last issue before Dragon Ball Z gets swallowed up by Viz's new monthly Shonen Jump anthology - and, predictably, it's an all-action issue. With Son Goku finally turning Super Saiyan, and kicking the merry crap out of bad guy du jour Freeza, the planet Namek is in trouble - these fighting titans have managed to destroy the planet's core. While the Goku/Freeza fight takes centre stage, another part of the story happens intermittently - namely the saving of the Namekians from the fate of their planet. Toriyama's art doesn't lose any of its quality at all - the fight retains that explosive, high impact, and frenetic style but he's still able to produce quieter moments.

The Verdict: US superhero comics could learn a thing or two from Toriyama's brutal fight sequences. A must for all action addicts. (KH)

Neon Genesis Evangelion: Special Collectors Edition Part 7 #5

By Yoshiyuki Sadamoto

Viz

Rather like Viz's other title Dragon Ball Z this issue is an all-fight issue, with Shinji's monstrous Evangelion taking on the ninth angel, Zeruel. It's a brutal, but stunningly well-drawn, fight, as Sadamoto's glorious artwork shines in depicting the frenetic destruction of Tokyo 3 thanks to the battling giants. This issue also brings other elements of the Evangelions to light - what they are, or might be - although you don't really get the chance to ponder these potential revelations with the battle raging in the foreground. In case you're wondering, the "Special Collectors Edition" tag relates to the fact that this version of the comic has untouched special effects and is printed in the original right-to-left format - although Viz have made provision for those unable to cope with such things, in the form of a fully-translated, reversed, version.

The Verdict: High in drama, high in action, high in mystery, and high in quality. (KH)

Orochi: Blood

By Kazuo Umezu

Viz

An unusual book this, partly because it's another release on the Pulp Graphic Novel label - a rare accolade - and also due to its age; this story was written in 1978. The genre to which the book belongs appears to be either horror or suspense - although I'm not sure which. The story is that of two sisters, the younger of whom is constantly compared to her elder sister, and admonished for not meeting her sister's perfection. Enter Orochi, an unusual girl of whom we learn little – she appears to be supernatural, although what her full powers are is never learned. She watches the two sisters grow up, but unfortunately falls into a long sleep after a car accident involving the younger sister - when she awakes she appears to be trapped in a different body, and from there the story turns a shade darker. This book serves as an adequate companion to British girls' comics, with which it shares its brutal edge. Umezu's artwork matches the story, with a prevailing darkness within the panels. It's all bleak, nasty and provides a view of the worst aspects of humanity.

The Verdict: A well-written suspense piece, horrific for its portrayal of humanity. (KH)

Project ARMS #1 and #2

By Ryouji Minagawa and Kyouichi Nanatsuki

Viz

Minagawa, artist of the Striker comic, brings forth his latest co-creation. Since it's the beginning of the series, I'm not going to spoil too much of the story for you - you'll just have to read it to find out.

The focus is on Ryo Takatsuki, your average high school kid - well, I say average, but he seems to have survival skills that would outdo Rambo! In comes new student Hayato Shingu, a rather troubled young man, who immediately beats the crap out of the school bullies, and then takes on Ryo. The next thing you know Ryo's being chased by a group of men, and his school friend Katsumi goes missing. And that's just issue 1!

Issue 2 sees another confrontation between Ryo and Hayato, but this one's a bit different from normal. The premise for this series is good, the characters well written, and - as with Striker - Minagawa's artwork suits the action-packed nature of the story.

The Verdict: Two fine opening issues, setting the scene for something good. (KH)

EASTERN PROMISES

There's so much of it about that Kevin Hill is spoilt for choice...

THIS month I've been in a fix for what to write about. I could pick on the newer series to hit the shelves, like the latest **Battle Angel Alita**, or **Project ARMS**, new from **Striker** (aka **Spriggan**) co-creator Ryoji Minagawa, and there's even the new Tokyopop 100% Authentic **Paradise Kiss** to talk about. But there are good reasons for not looking at these, although I'll come back to each of them when the time is right.

Borderline's editor has been pressuring me to write about Japanese porn comics, something I know little… no, *nothing* about. The problem is that the subject of sex, and of violence, has been covered a multitude of times - normally just pointing out how much there appears to be of both, giving the reader a false impression. Sex in comics is just not a subject that inspires me, and - of course - could end up giving the impression that I'm some sex-starved loon who gets his kicks reading porn comics. But violence? Now, that I'll write about. Regardless of whether it might give the impression that I'm some form of psychotic fan-boy. So here goes.

There's a lot of violence in manga. To qualify that: there's a lot of violence in the manga that travels across the Pacific. It seems a condition of the overall market that English translations of Japanese works exist in. That's not to say that all manga are full of violence - many have little, or even none. It's dependent on the story itself, and rarely gratuitous. Consider Katsuhiro Otomo's masterpiece, **Akira**: throughout its 1000+ pages there are numerous beatings, shootings, even the odd evisceration and decapitation - it's full of violence. Mostly this is because it deals with the subject of biker gangs, and the aftermath of a disaster where the Army and Police no longer exist and chaos reigns. The violence exists to convey who the lead characters Kaneda and Tetsuo are, and it also provides a more adventurous story.

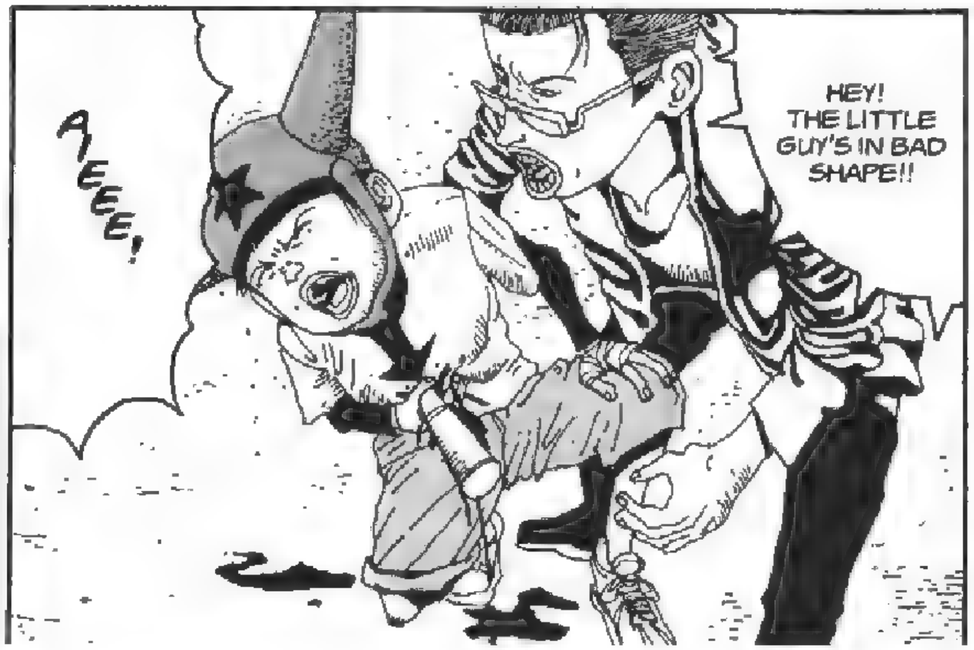
In reality, a decision on what is considered a violent comic needs to be made. Take Yuriko Nishiyama's **Harlem Beat**; the story of teenaged Nate, his growing fascination with basketball, and his growing skills as a basketball player. He does come up against bullies, and sometimes the story contains violence - but is it a violent comic? No, it's not. Kenichi Sonoda's **Gunsmith Cats** contains a lot of shoot-outs, and therefore a lot of violence. People lose thumbs and limbs and get killed, but it's hardly mindless. So

A relaxed Black and a mixed-up White. On the next page more B&W and Bakune.

highlighting it just for that, especially when the stories themselves are interesting and the characters engaging, is missing the point. Few titles that have reached the English-speaking world revel in their violence. But there are a few.

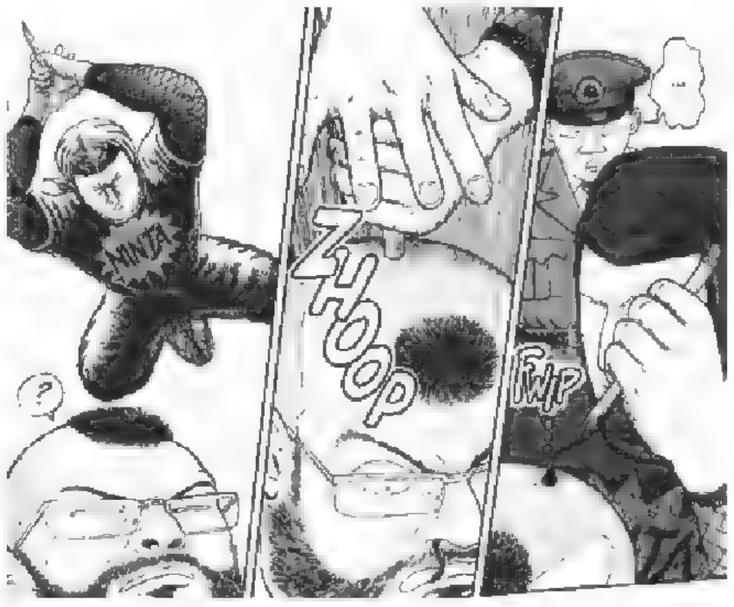
Foremost is Toyokazu Matsunaga's **Bakune Young**, which was serialised in Viz Communications' **Pulp: The Manga Magazine**. It positively revelled in violence - most of which was perpetrated by the eponymous anti-hero. There seemed to be little justification for any of the violence in **Bakune** except possibly for acts motivated by revenge, but as much of the violence *was* in revenge, the book became too saturated with violence to distinguish these acts. Matsunaga's art style, while far uglier than most manga, gave an almost stylish quality to the violence - panels depicted snapshots of violence, frozen in time. The violence was extreme, unnecessary, and ugly, but in a way that tickled the voyeuristic gene within you - you had to see what Bakune was going to do next.

That's the problem: violence is for the voyeur. But it has to be measured, and not too graphic. **Bakune** takes it to the line - it's nearly too violent for its own good - but were the series toned down, it would probably lose much of the point of its existence. What is scary is that, from a certain point of view, **Bakune Young** could be seen as a comment on Japanese society. It does astound many that such a peaceful, quiet nation as Japan could be fascinated with violence.



Compare **Bakune** with another series that portrayed stylised violence, and also premiered in **Pulp**. Taiyo Matsumoto's **Black & White**, a tale of two young boys who live and survive on the mean streets of a city, contained similar snapshots of violence - only Matsumoto's unusual style isn't as ugly as Matsunaga's and so gives the violence a more artistic bent. Black, the more physical of the boys, commits various acts of violence throughout the story, mostly to protect White, who has a very child-like mind - these acts often involve beating upon adults, although not always. The story isn't about violence, though, as much as Black and White's relationship. It studies the ties that bind.

These are all entirely different comics but are united in one respect: their portrayal of violence. It's not clean violence - it's nasty, brutal. But you'll love it. It's violence - it's entertainment.



AFTER THE STORM

We've seen how comicbook companies responded to last year's September 11 tragedy with benefit books - take a look at The Manhattan Projects special for Borderline's coverage. Now, Mike Sivier discovers a new comicbook dealing with the tragedy head-on - and he's not *talking about The Amazing Spider-Man #36.*

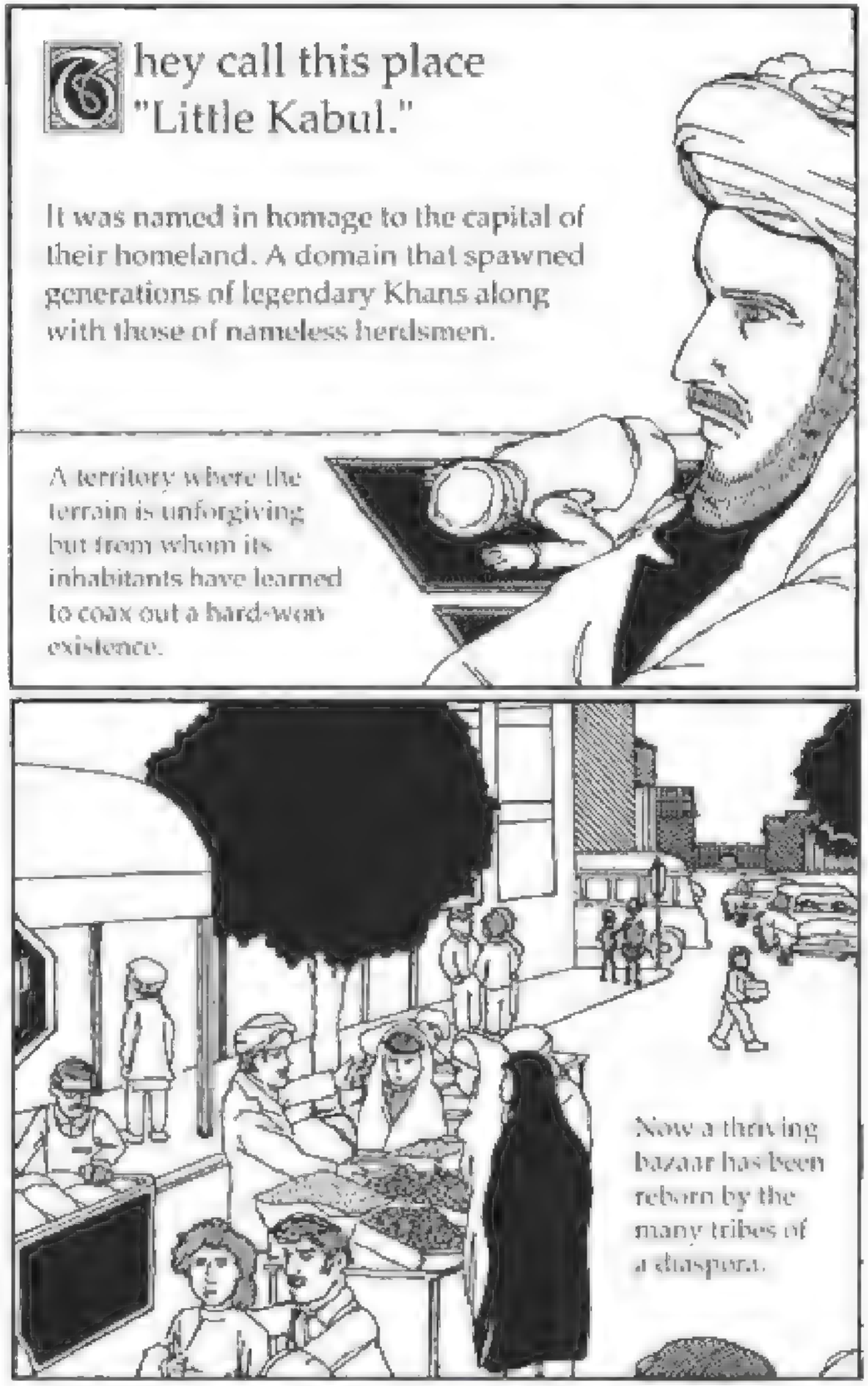
A NEW comics company, dedicated to improving cross-cultural relationships, has launched its first title - throwing open what its creator hopes is a window on the world.

Nine of One: A Window to the World, by Oliver Chin, shows how nine California teenagers make sense of the tumult which follows an international crisis. The youngsters - from a history class at James Madison High School, Union City, California - are champing at the bit of adulthood.

But in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, they must struggle to reinterpret the past, present and future, confronting the words and deeds of adults who have tipped their world off its axis. Their 11th grade history teacher steers his students forward, turning them into reporters who seek the answers which may have become lost within a conflicting mix of emotions, facts, and opinions. They overcome their initial confusion to interview the people they meet, and from an increasingly multicultural community comes a spectrum of opinions - American and Native American, Afghani and Soviet, Arab and Jew, Asian and Indian, Latin and Black.

To fulfil their mission, do they have what it takes to confront the strangers within their midst?

If all this seems to you like cross-cultural propaganda, you may not be far from the truth. Creator Oliver Chin is the founder of Immedium,


They call this place "Little Kabul."
It was named in homage to the capital of their homeland. A domain that spawned generations of legendary Khans along with those of nameless herdsmen.
A territory where the terrain is unforgiving but from whom its inhabitants have learned to coax out a hard-won existence.
Now a thriving bazaar has been reborn by the many tribes of a diaspora.

Oliver Chin's artwork on these pages and over

a company dedicated to improving cultural dialogue through the mass media - and if any event in recent history cried out for people in different cultures to actually stop and talk to each other, then the attack of September 11, 2001 is that event.

Mr Chin says: "In light of the flood of TV coverage, books, and retrospectives which came out on the anniversary of 9/11, I mean to take a different perspective on how people can evaluate this event and the world around us. With open minds and sharpened pencils, these teens scratch through the surface of misunderstanding to find that this story is not simple or uniform."

"Who is with Us and against Them?" he asks. "Is good and evil in the eye of the beholder? Listening to locals who share worldwide tales, these students rediscover a time-honoured truth - that we have to learn from history to not repeat it."

According to Oliver Chin, Nine of One offers readers a chance to encounter diverse walks of life and uncomfortable opinions, and thereby confront the validity of their own views.

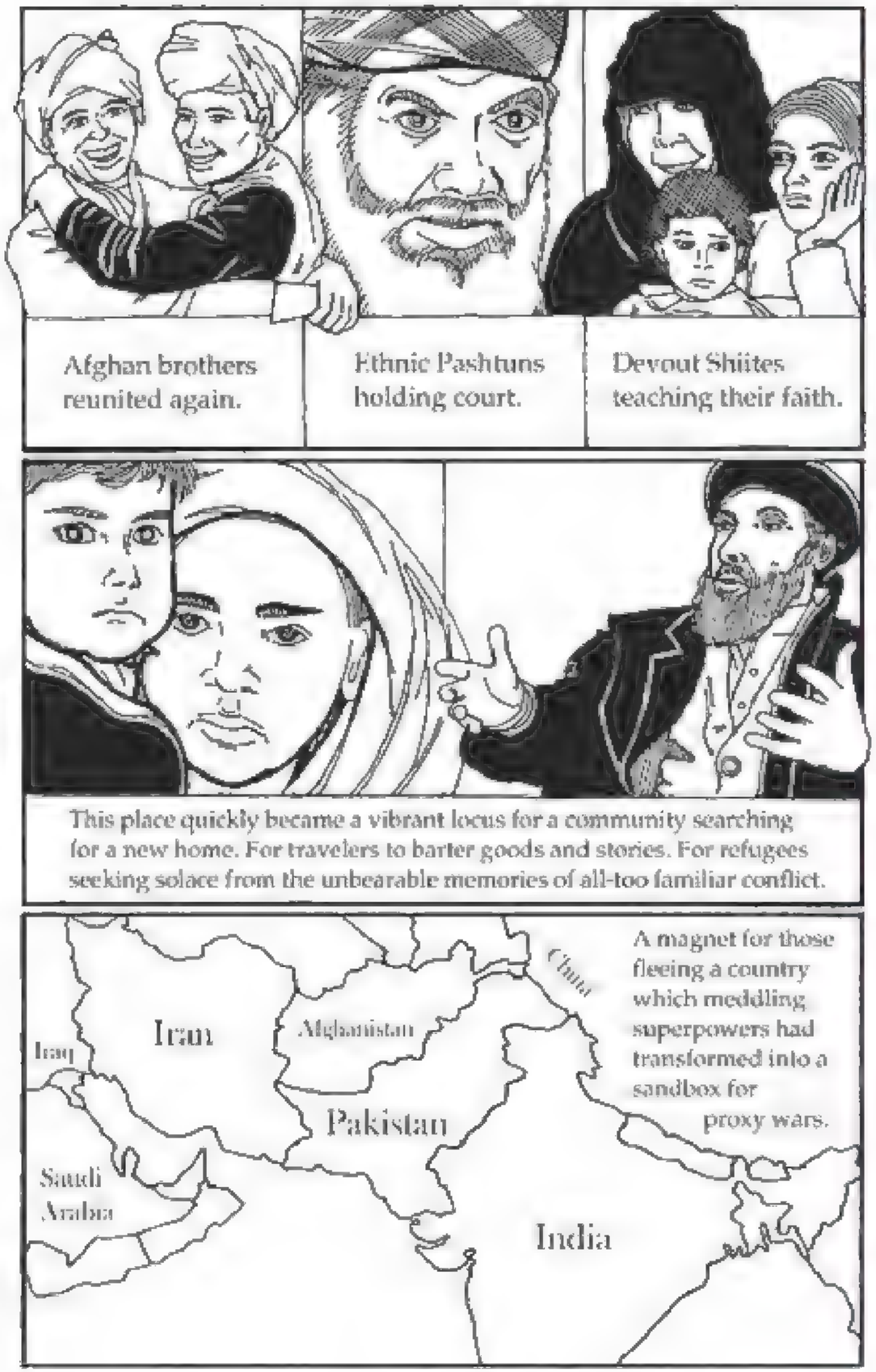
Can the next generation sort out a world which is growing smaller, yet more divisive, by the day? It seems our future may well depend upon it. Mr Chin puts it this way: "Nine of One is a nuanced, unconventional, and poignant commentary that will resonate with young adults around the world who face an array of grown-up choices. From Generation Y to their Baby Boomer parents, readers will respond to Nine of One and appreciate how a land of a thousand voices can find common ground."

Nine of One is scheduled to be published as a full length graphic novel in early 2003, but Mr Chin said he has decided to print it while he completes it, as a three-issue limited series.

Oliver Chin is currently Director of Sales and Marketing for North Atlantic Books, an independent book publisher based in Berkeley, California - but that does not make him a stranger to comics.

He has been Director of Sales and Marketing for Viz Communications, the largest US publisher of Japanese animation and comicbooks, where he brought anime and manga into the American mainstream by promoting comics, books, magazines, DVDs, and merchandise for best-selling series such as Pokemon, Dragon Ball Z, Mobile Suit Gundam and Ranma 1/2. He is also a weekly entertainment reviewer for Comic Buyers Guide, a monthly columnist for Comics and Games Retailer magazine, and cartoonist for the San Francisco Call and New Mission News.

Nine of One: A Window to the World #1 ships on November 29. The black-and-white, 32-page title is priced at $2.95 USA.


Afghan brothers reunited again.
Ethnic Pashtuns holding court.
Devout Shiites teaching their faith.
This place quickly became a vibrant locus for a community searching for a new home. For travelers to barter goods and stories. For refugees seeking solace from the unbearable memories of all-too familiar conflict.
Iran
Iraq
Afghanistan
China
Pakistan
Saudi Arabia
India
A magnet for those fleeing a country which meddling superpowers had transformed into a sandbox for proxy wars.

BORDERLINE VOL #1 CDS

Would you like a complete set of **Borderline**?
The first 16 regular issues, the Manhattan Projects Special, and a special bonus Borderline feature?
Over the last 16 months we've covered some major events, interviewed some pretty big people and produced one of the most popular and dependable comics magazines in the world.
How much is it going to cost?
If you live in the UK it's £12.50 inclusive. The US and Canada is $30.00 inclusive and Europe is €30.00 also inclusive of p&p.
All cheques and IMOs should be made payable to ***P. Hall*** and please allow at least 28 days for delivery. All enquiries to the editorial address on page 2.
To pay via Paypal contact *squonk_uk@yahoo.com* for details!

A LETTER FROM URUGUAY

We haven't run a letter column in ***Borderline*** *for a while – but when we received the following email from Ignacio Alcuri, one of our regular readers in Uruguay, we felt we really wanted to share it with the rest of you. Uruguay isn't exactly a country that's big on the world comics map, but, as Ignacio explains, it's a place where comics are now beginning to take off. And with so many people in Europe and America nowadays complaining about how the comics medium is dying out, we really enjoyed reading Ignacio's account of a place where it's all starting to happen. We hope you enjoy it too.*

IT'S great to know that a magazine is not made by itself but by people, and that people are kind enough to answer email from the other side of the world! I'll try to give you an idea about comics in my country.

Uruguay has a population of 3 million - half of this lives in Montevideo, the capital city. Try not to laugh, but Montevideo has the only two comic book stores in the country.

One is called "El Rincón del Coleccionista" ("The Collector's Corner"). Its speciality is European comics. It has a lot of comics from Spain, France, and also underground or alternative comics from the US, like **Hate**, R. Crumb's work, etc. It also has about the same proportion of mainstream comics. It's important that very many of the comics there are in Uruguay's language, Spanish.

The other one is called "Lecturas" ("Writings"), and it's located only two blocks away from the first shop!!! (I'm not kidding - and you can laugh in this about that bit!). Lecturas stocks mainstream comics. It has a lot of Marvel and DC titles in Spanish, plus a lesser amount of Manga and role-playing game books.

But the importance of "Lecturas", for me, is that it is the only shop that stocks Diamond's *Previews*. That means I can order any American comic that I want from most of the publishers (yes, I know, Diamond *is* the devil but in the Third World you always have to deal with the devil).

Did I say I could order any comic that I wanted? Wrong. A couple of months ago, as a consequence of the huge economic crisis in neighbouring Argentina, the US Dollar shot up in value compared with the local currency, the Peso. That means that even though my salary remains the same, American comics now cost me nearly twice as much as they did before. That's ok, I'm fine, life is not only about comics; there's soccer too!!.

As I said, those are the only two comicbook stores. Then there are a couple of dozen bookstores (mostly the ones located in the malls) that have a rack or two of mixed comics, in Spanish. The comics distribution for most of these bookstores is organised through the Lecturas shop.

As for Uruguayan national production, it is almost insignificant in quantity. There are a couple of good publications, but because they are published in small editions, that makes them very expensive, so they end up being published erratically. As for an independent market, you can always find a creator sitting in a flea markets on Sunday morning selling their photocopied comics. I say good for them.

Oh, I almost forget the great part. A few months ago we had our first Comic Convention, with a lot of people attending, and hosts like Eduardo Barretto and a lot of people from the medium. That was great as a starting point. And here in Uruguay, things can only get better!

Now a little about me (yes, I know you didn't ask!). I'm 22, I work in a printing house and in the weekend I have a humor segment in the radio show of my favourite soccer team, *Defensor*. I've written a book and a half of short stories, but so far no publisher has wanted it. Together with a couple of friends I'm finishing a fanzine called **Le Bizarre** which will contain everything from comics to "Where's Waldo?" and strange things you can make with your PC. It'll be funny and disturbing!

I enjoy all kinds of comics, but I really like the well-written superhero ones, like **Doom Patrol**. And I just love **X-Force**.

Finally I would like to tell you how I learned about **Borderline**, but I'm not entirely sure! I guess somebody wrote about your first number on *AllDC@yahoogroups.com* (a great mailing list for all things DC). That's right, I've been a fan of **Borderline** since number 1, and when I get the mail from your mailing list at the beginning of the month I start downloading the Hi-Res version from the slow, slow, slooooooow connection that I have at work. Yeah, that's right. I download it at work. Just keep quiet about this fact. *[To anyone at Ignacio's workplace who may be reading this - we made up that last bit! Honest. - Production Ed.]*

Thanks for all and for taking time to answer a fan from the other side of the world.

Ignacio Alcuri
puritano@montevideo.com.uy

MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's been reading his fan mail...

I'VE had a letter. More of a communication, really, as "letter" is so old-fashioned a term in this modern age. It reads thusly:

Dear Martin

Regarding your review of 100 Bullets in Borderline 15. The story makes more entertaining reading if you wait for the trade paperbacks. Why not wait until the collection is published and see if you like it more then?

Yours,
David Wallwork

Well, David, you have a point. 100 Bullets does read better if taken in large doses. Doing so doesn't necessarily make it a better book if you ask me - the series still suffers from longueurs and expects the reader to make an effort that simply isn't repaid by the story. But reading in collection does take away the frustration of waiting a month between episodes only to find that sod all happens next issue anyway.

My question is this: if 100 Bullets is more enjoyable when read in collected form, does this mean that Brian Azzarello is consciously writing the series to be read in that form? Put it another way: even though the series' original publication is in short monthly chapters, is it intended for consumption in longform?

I have to point out here that I'm not intending to criticise 100 Bullets or its creators here: that is the job of our Verdict section and that is why the original criticism of the series was in that section rather than here. The aim here, as with the column on Alan Moore's Promethea a few months ago, is to make the observation that certain series currently being published are seemingly intended for longform and that the intention leads to a certain (shall we say) slowness in the monthly serialisation.

You may say, as I rather hope you will, that some great works of literature were originally published in a serialised format: Charles Dickens wrote most of his novels in serial form, only later seeing them in collection, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the *Sherlock Holmes* stories specifically for magazine publication. I'd counter that by saying that Dickens' serialisation was generally in weekly publications and so there was no great wait between episodes, and that Conan Doyle tended to write short but complete stories for periodical publications.

What I'm going to say here is this: if a work is intended for longform publication, then it should be published in longform. If a work is better served by collection, then conversely it is weakened by serialisation. If Brian Azzarello is writing long stories which just happen to be cut into equal episodes, we should not be seeing monthly issues of 100 Bullets; we should be seeing original 100 Bullets books being published whenever Azzarello and co-creator Eduardo Risso have a complete story.

Now then: the downside, as always, is you, the reader. It's also me: I'm not blameless, and I'll tell you why. One of the comic books I've enjoyed most in recent years was Peter Milligan and the late Edvin Biukovic's revamp of The Human Target. It was a fine series that worked on many levels, and nobody was more pleased than I when a sequel to that original series (if the term "original" can be applied to something that was a revamp) was announced. The sequel has been published: it's called Final Cut and it's a fine-looking, beautifully designed hardback graphic novel. I haven't bought a copy. I probably won't. I'd strongly consider buying a paperback edition or borrowing a copy from a library, but when it comes to putting down the necessary amount of cash for a copy of a book that's barely 100 pages long, which can easily be read in one evening, or possibly in one hour... I honestly cannot see myself doing that. And, most probably, neither can you.

You can say that I'd quite happily spent ten dollars - about eight pounds sterling - for the original Human Target miniseries in pamphlet format, and that the extra amount needed to buy the hardback is justified by the sturdier packaging and lack of advertising subsidy. And I'd quite happily agree with you. But I'm still not going to pay twenty quid or so for a bloody comicbook no matter how good it is. It's as simple as that: many, many people are happy to buy original graphic novels - which, make no mistake, I strongly believe are the best hope for the future of the comics industry. I myself will fork over whatever it takes to get hold of a copy of <insert trendy Top Shelf creator name here>'s latest work. I'm not alone, though, in feeling a deeply ingrained and frankly inexplicable resistance to buying expensive original longform work from creators I've become familiar with through shorter work. It's comparable to enjoying a band's singles but not wanting to buy a whole album: they're good for three minutes but might not be for an hour.

The cover to the latest 100 Bullets!

And therein lies a further problem: but we're out of space, so we'll return to this next month. Pay attention: there may be a test.

DOMINION OVER ALL?

The Ross Richie Interview

A LOT can happen in a year. Just twelve months ago Hollywood producer Ross Richie wrote a film review of the newly released From Hell *for Borderline. Now Ross has his first comicbook due out - and he's starting out big, scripting and co-plotting Dominion, a new project for Image devised and drawn by Keith Giffen. Giffen's been giving a lot of interviews about it, so we thought we'd send Mike Kidson to corner the quiet man of the project instead and ask about how it feels jumping in at the deep end...*

Borderline: So what's the story - how did up and coming film producer Ross Richie find himself dialoguing a new comics project by Keith Giffen?
Ross Richie: I always try to make myself available to any comic book creator who wants advice regarding Hollywood - totally as unbiased and a neutral party, who won't slant your perspective. It's just a courtesy, and I think it's a crime how many Hollywood hucksters approach comic book creators, sell them a bill of goods, and take advantage of them. Keith heard about that and called, and we became friends.

Then one day he called me up and said, "You're writing Dominion."

BL: No offence intended, but you're a tyro as a scripter, whereas Keith's a known, very well established name in the industry - so presumably this is something of a challenge for you?
RR: Absolutely. Just ask Keith. I turn in several versions of the script when I write it, showing him different approaches. He keeps telling me to settle down and relax, I don't need to do so much work!

BL: So what kind of approaches are you offering - different generic styles, or differences in tone, or what? And what, if any, kind does Keith tend to prefer?
RR: I was experimenting in storytelling styles, i.e. doing it via dialogue alone, only through captions, or doing captions from different narrator viewpoints.

Keith really had no preference per se, he was instead a huge help giving me constructive criticism about what worked and what didn't.

BL: How does that feel, and what do you feel you're getting out of it?
RR: It's a blast. I love writing, and I love working with Keith. It's the most fun I've had creatively in years, and Keith has become a close friend. It's incredibly gratifying as a fan to meet one of your favorite creators and find out that he's far more than an upstanding guy - he's a godsend. I owe Keith a lot.

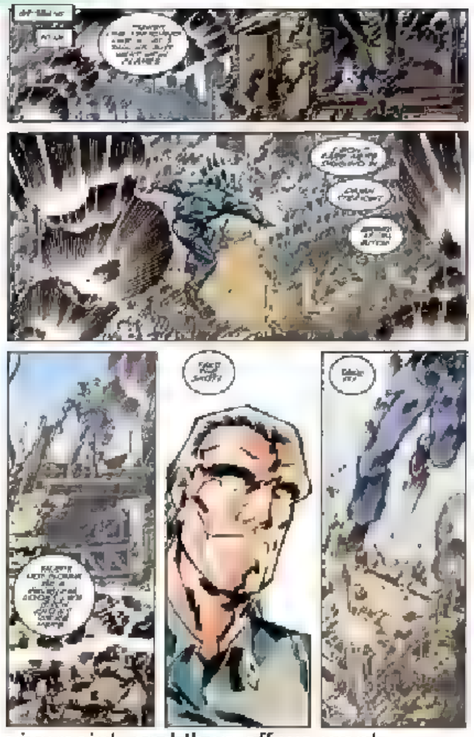
BL: Are you working under any directions - imposed either by Keith or by yourself - regarding the style of dialogue you write?
RR: None at all. Keith's been open to whatever tack I want to take. He leaves me alone, but I always end up calling him and asking him what he thinks. He's got some experience, I hear. ☺

BL: Yeah, I believe so. ☺ So there's a lot of give and take here in both directions?
RR: Sure, but I usually just step out of the way. The man knows what he's doing! ☺

BL: And the other side of the coin - how much input into Dominion do you have, beyond supplying the words, thoughts and narration?
RR: Well, I'm not just scripting, I'm co-plotting.

BL: Ah, I hadn't realised that...
RR: We call each other up and talk over each issue before he puts pencil to paper. He's incredibly collaborative.

BL: So how much plot input would you say you've had - are all the main concepts in the series Keith's, or have you put in a lot of basic concepts as well?
RR: Keith had the idea of the meteor shower, and cribbed in the idea of the "resistance" (i.e. the humans that will be fighting the super-powered beings for the fate of the planet) from another idea I had. I tossed in a few fore-ground characters, but the lead, Vasher, is his. I named him, and am "characterizing" him, but the concept was Keith's. We agreed on his narrative



viewpoint, and then off we went.

BL: In fact, can you give us a quick co-plotter/scripter's view of what the book is about - apart from trashing Australia? ☺
RR: A meteor shower hits Earth, bringing with it a virus that has conquered a million worlds. The virus gives powers to the victims it infects, and in this iteration, it infects the wrong people - people who *won't* use their power to fight crime or for the betterment of mankind. These new super-powered characters then establish a "dominion" in Australia, and the world has to figure out how to react.

*BL: I'm seeing a lot of Kirby in those pages... of course, Keith used to do a dynamite Kirby impression back in the day (cf. Defenders #49 and Wonder Woman #300, for instance), but it's nice to see him doing work here which looks more like *his* art with a Kirby influence showing. If you know what I mean?*
RR: Absolutely. It was quite clear to me, as well. Keith's quite enthusiastically pulling that stuff to the surface. He's going "old school" with it, and has talked extensively about it. He also considers this a more "animation" style.

BL: How does the creative process work here? That is, what kind of material does Keith supply you to work with - thumbnails, pencils, whatever?
RR: After we've talked, Keith sends his pencils over, and I dialogue off that.

BL: Tell us a bit about your own preferences in comics. Favourite artists? Favourite writers? Biggest influences (if any)?
RR: John Cassaday is a god, Art Adams is just as good as when he showed up as a young turk. Howard Chaykin should draw as much as he writes. I love Ed McGuinness. Mignola is a genius. I'm leaving out dozens of favorites here, obviously.

I love all the usual suspects. Mark Waid's knocking it out of the park on the FF. I couldn't believe how good Bendis' *Underboss* story was in DD. I

read the ABC books. Anything by Warren Ellis. I'm getting a kick out of Morrison's X-Men, I liked Chuck Austen's War Machine limited series, I just recently discovered a lot of manga, and am enjoying Vagabond. I was also a big fan of John Ney Reiber. Lucifer is wonderful (the comic, not the anti-Christ). The Ultimates is great and I always enjoy Hellboy.

Warren Ellis has had a profound impact on how I approach comics. And right now, I've got the Alan Moore Swamp Things on my desk just like every other rookie writer.

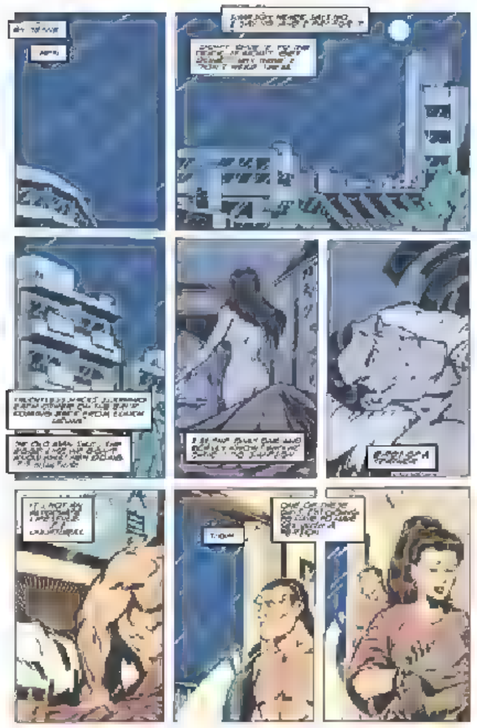
BL: I'm guessing that working on comics is a sideline to your main interest, film production - but would you be open to more of this kind of work?
RR: Absolutely. It's been a blast.

BL: What variety - creator-owned, company-owned, alternative?
RR: When it comes to that sort of stuff, I'm always going to advocate creator-owned. But it might be fun to do one old super-hero project at one of the Big Two some day.

BL: Can you tell us anything about any film productions you have in the pipeline?
RR: Sure.I'm producing a script called *Kringle* with the guy who won a screenwriting Oscar for *A Beautiful Mind*, Akiva Goldsman, and I'm producing a script at Universal that takes a very *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* approach to their venerated monsters - like Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Wolfman.

BL: An animation project, then?
RR: No, it's live action. In the way that *Roger Rabbit* said cartoons weren't drawings, but real, this project takes movie monsters and says they're not actors in makeup, they're real.

BL: How are Universal about you handling a bunch of their icons?
RR: We shall see! ☺



BL: And how about writing? Is film scripting a direction you'd like to move in?
RR: I'd love to. I'm putting my toe in right now, we'll see how it goes.

BL: Finally, the usual Borderline personal questions! What's your favourite listening right now?
RR: I listen to a lot of Crystal Method when I write nowadays. Love Radiohead, U2, Wilco, Peter Case. P.O.D. has really knocked my socks off recently, but I haven't kept up with music like I'd like to.

BL: Your favourite viewing?
RR: TV is *The Sopranos*, *Alias*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, my pal Andy Cosby's TV show *Haunted*. I'm also a sucker for *Friends*, *Survivor*, and now, thanks to Steven Grant's recommendation, *The Amazing Race*. Movies - this year I really liked *Brotherhood of the Wolf* and *Amelie*. *LOTR*, of course.

BL: Favourite reading matter?
RR: Lately it's been comics, comics, comics and scripts, scripts, scripts. Little time for little else.

BL: Favourite food?
RR: I was raised on Mexican food in Texas, but really like Thai now that I'm in California.

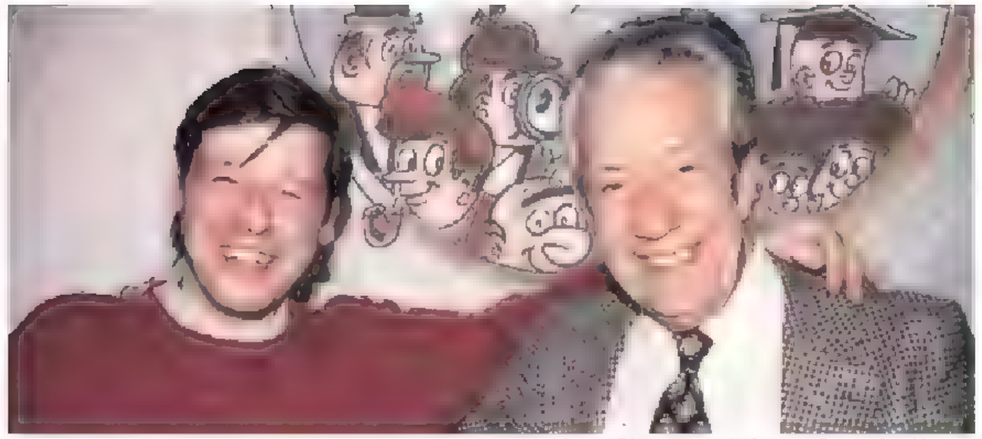
BL: Favourite car?
RR: I like the fuel-efficient hybrid cars, like the Toyota Prius. Hate SUVs.

BL: OK, that's quite enough of that. Thanks for talking to us, Ross.
RR: My pleasure!

***Dominion** #1, by Keith Giffen and Ross Richie, is scheduled for publication by Image Comics in January 2003.*

END OF A NERO

On December 31 one of the classic creators of Flemish comics is ending the newspaper strip he's produced daily ever since 1947. Borderline's Mike Kidson looks at the background to this event, explains the history and nature of the cancelled strip, and should probably apologise for the title of this piece…



Marc Sleen (right) and Dirk Stallaert

THE story broke on the front page of the Belgian daily newspaper *De Standaard*, on August 21 – on the final day of 2001, the day following his 80th birthday, Marc Sleen would be concluding his newspaper strip **Nero**, published for many years in *De Standaard* and reprinted in albums by Standaard Uitgeverij. It all seemed to be straightforward enough: Sleen's eyesight is deteriorating, and after 55 years of producing the strip on a daily basis (and 217 album reprints, enough to have gained him an entry in the **Guinness Book of Records**) he felt that it was high time to lay the pen aside.

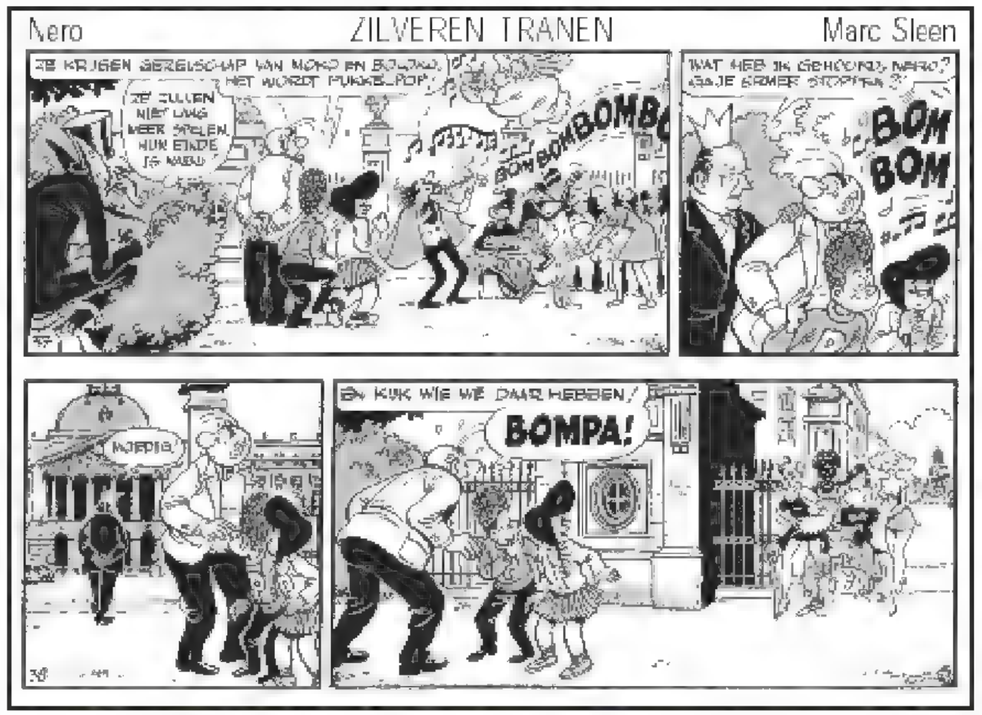
But this is a big news story in Belgium, and on August 22 Geert De Weyer, comics critic for rival paper *De Morgen*, presented the results of some hasty interviewing. It transpired that Sleen's collaborator Dirk Stallaert, who has done much of the drawing on **Nero** since 1992, was leaving to work on another Flemish classic strip, **Suske en Wiske**. It's since been learned that in fact he will be collaborating with Merho (Robert Merhottein), creator of yet another highly popular strip series, **Kiekeboe**; but the outcome remains the same. With the departure of his collaborator, Sleen felt unable or unwilling to carry on with the strip. Nor, apparently did he wish to pass it on to any other artist: as he said to de Weyer, "Ach, weet je, Nero ben ik, he? Het is mijn geest die erdoor waait. Het zou nooit meer hetzelfde zijn, vrees ik." ("Nero is me, you understand? It comes from my soul. I'm afraid it just wouldn't be the same.")

So the final story arc of this classic strip is currently being serialised in *De Standaard*. But **Borderline** readers in countries where the cancellation of a newspaper strip is not exactly headline news, let alone a subject for follow-up media coverage, may be wondering why this is so big a story. The rest of this article will attempt to offer some explanation of that.

Nero's first appearance in 1947, with Van Zwam and Matsuoka (unconscious)

A mirror of the times

In *De Morgen* on August 24, novelist and playwright Walter van den Broeck commented: ""Als je alle de 217 albums na elkaar leest, heb je een goed beeld van hoe de Belg in de straat reageerde op de actualiteit van die tijd" ("If you read all 217 albums in sequence, you'll get a good idea of how the man in the street reacted to current affairs"). That sums up perhaps the two most

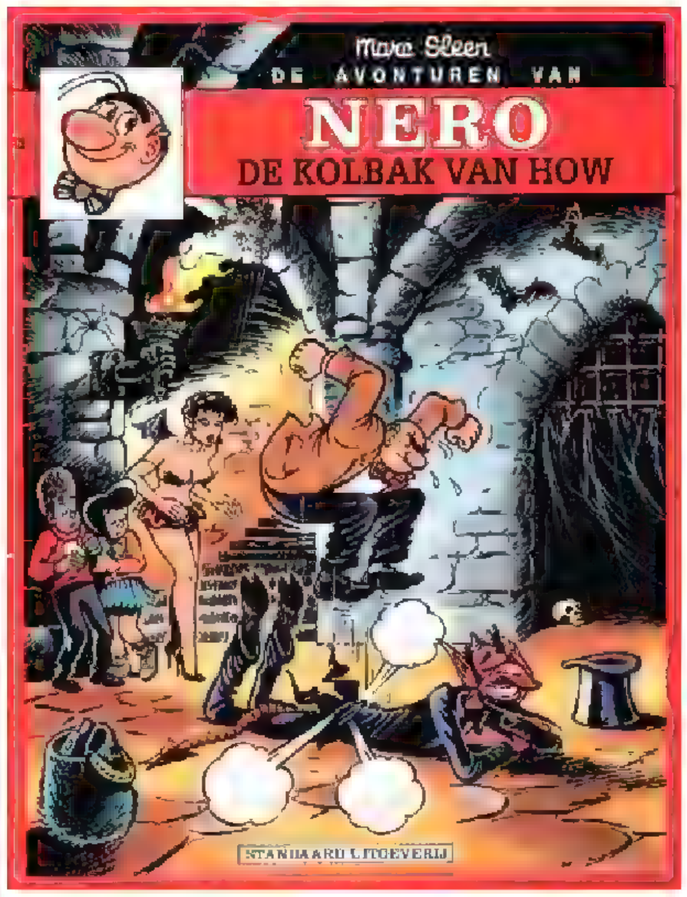


An instalment from the current, final story arc. The scene is set in a well-known Brussels public garden; Geeraard de Duivel lurks to the left of panel 1; the man with the paper crown in panel 2 is Albert II, King of Belgium

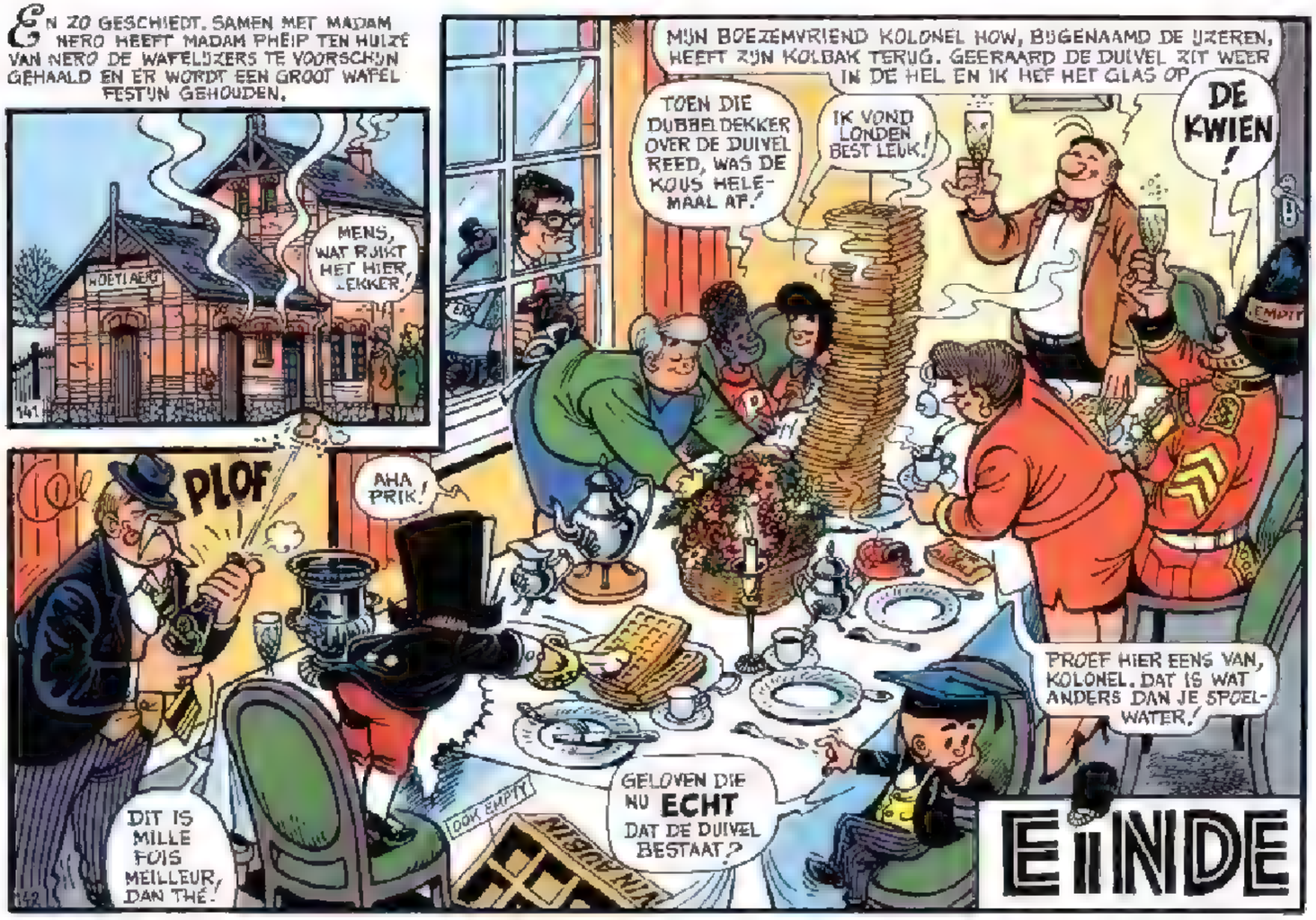
significant reasons for **Nero**'s appeal - not good art or good writing, although it has always had both of those, but its reflection of Flemish culture and its light-hearted but telling treatment of the daily news on both a local and an international level. For more than half a century **Nero** has been more than just entertainment; it's been part of Flemish daily life.

In their 1995 book **Strips, Aha!**, Patrick Van Gompel and Ad Hendrickx identified Marc Sleen, together with Willy Vandersteen and Bob De Moor, as one of the key originators of Flemish mainstream comics. All three began their major work during the Flemish cultural renaissance that immediately followed World War 2, and they made comics an integral part of national culture by making local history, architecture and preoccupations central to their work. But where Vandersteen and De Moor concentrated particularly on the historical aspect, it was Sleen who most employed his principal newspaper strip as a vehicle for entertaining reference to political and current affairs as they were seen by Belgian citizens.

Nero made his first appearance in 1947, as a supporting character in **De Avonturen van Van Swam**, a daily strip about a bungling detective which Sleen wrote and drew for *De Nieuwe Gids* newspaper. In the story arc *Het geheim van Matsuoka* (The Secret of Matsuoka), various characters including an ordinary citizen named Mr. Schoonpaard were drugged into believing that they were characters from history - Schoonpaard, believing himself to be the Roman emperor Nero, dressed up in a toga and wore a circlet of vine leaves on his head. Already the references to local culture and events were firmly in place. The villainous



The cover of a 1994 Sleen and Stallaert album, featuring Geeraard de Duivel


EN ZO GESCHIEDT. SAMEN MET MADAM NERO HEEFT MADAM PHEIP TEN HUIZE VAN NERO DE WAFELIJZERS TE VOORSCHIJN GEHAALD EN ER WORDT EEN GROOT WAFEL FESTIJN GEHOUDEN.
MENS, WAT RUIKT HET HIER LEKKER!
PLOF
AHA PRIK!
DIT IS MILLE FOIS MEILLEUR DAN THÉ!
MIJN BOEZEMVRIEND KOLONEL HOW, BIJGENAAMD DE IJZEREN, HEEFT ZIJN KOLBAK TERUG. GEERAARD DE DUIVEL ZIT WEER IN DE HEL EN IK HEF HET GLAS OP.
TOEN DIE DUBBELDEKKER OVER DE DUIVEL REED, WAS DE KOUS HELEMAAL AF!
IK VOND LONDEN BEST LEUK!
DE KWIEN!
PROEF HIER EENS VAN, KOLONEL. DAT IS WAT ANDERS DAN JE SPOELWATER!
GELOVEN DIE NU ECHT DAT DE DUIVEL BESTAAT?
EINDE

A traditional "wafelenbak" conclusion as drawn by Sleen and Stallaert

Matsuoka was named after the wartime Japanese foreign minister, and the drug he used to alter the personalities of various Belgians was a specially brewed beer: a vile and insidious strike to the heart of Belgian culture, given that production and consumption of fine beer is one of the country's major industries and interests. Even Schoonpaard's name was, according to Sleen, a reference to an official at *De Nieuwe Gids*. At the end of the story Schoonpaard and the other Belgians were restored to their right minds… but Sleen chose to retain the name Nero, and Nero never quite lost his Roman guise. To this day he is drawn with a couple of vine leaves behind each ear!

Nero continued to appear in the strip, and gradually began to take over as the lead character. In 1950 *De Nieuwe Gids* was bought by another paper, *Het Volk*, to which **De Avonturen van Van Swam** was transferred; and with the album publication of the first Het Volk story arc, *De hoed van Geeraard de Duivel* (The Hat of Gerard the Devil), the strip was officially renamed **De Avonturen van Nero en Co.**. Besides the comedic encounter between Nero and the (literally) satanic Geeraard, that story arc contained Sleen's input on the most controversial event in Belgium in 1950, the heated and even violent debate over whether the Belgian King, Leopold III, should be reinstated and the country return to being a monarchy. Sleen, together with Vandersteen and De Moor, came out strongly in favour of monarchy - and it is almost certain that the work of the three cartoonists influenced the nation's decision (a compromise: in 1951 the unpopular Leopold III abdicated and was succeeded by his son, Boudewijn I).

And so it continued. Until

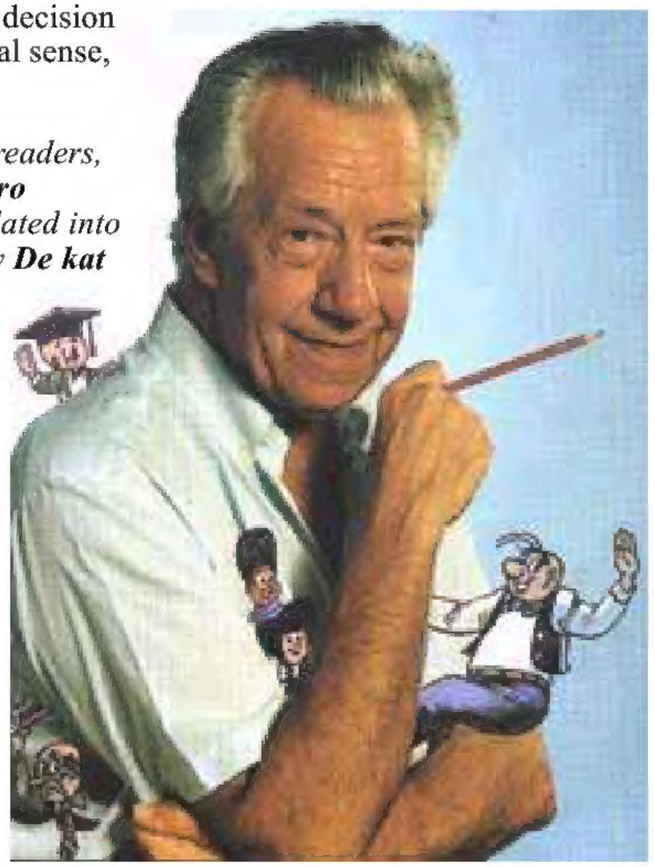
1992 Sleen wrote and drew **Nero** alone, transferring it to *De Standaard* when his contract with *Het Volk* ended in 1965 (a deal sweetened by Standaard Uitgeverij's proposal to publish the album collections in colour for the first time) but always mixing current affairs with fantasy adventures; not just Belgian politics but major international sporting events, wars and so forth. Hence Walter van den Broeck's comment – as a whole, **Nero** amounts to an ongoing popular cultural commentary on the second half of the 20th Century.

A man of the people

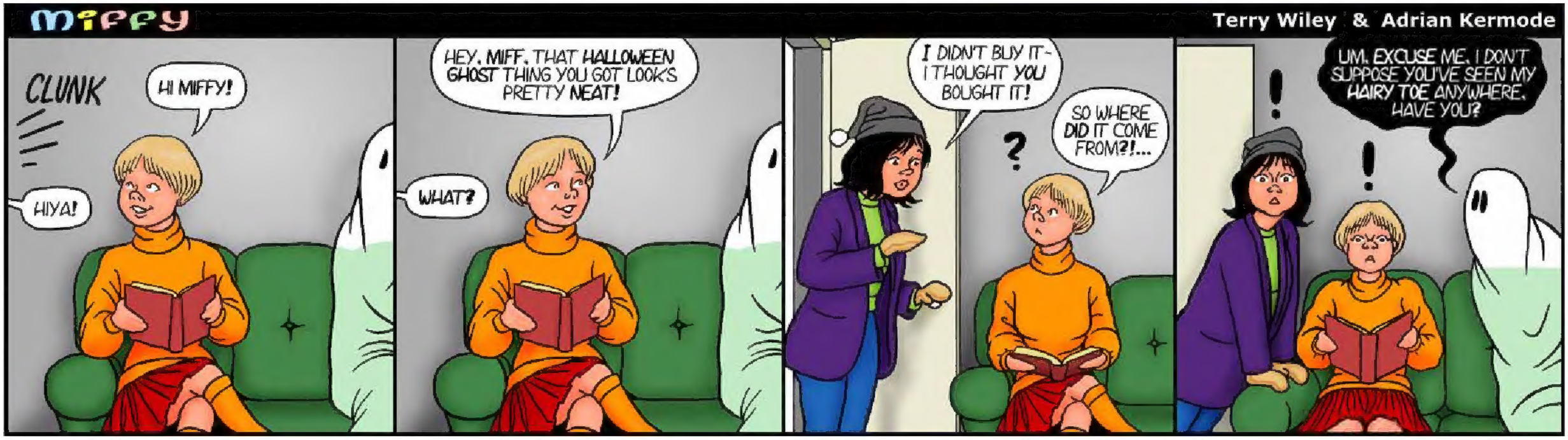
But the other side of its importance derives from Schoonpaard/Nero's status as an everyday Belgian. As early as the 1950s Sleen began developing a huge cast of regular supporting characters: the demoted Van Swam, the former pirate Tuizenfloot, Nero's wife, his adoptive son Petoetje (an unusually occurrence of a black child in a Belgian strip) and later his boy genius son Adhemar, pipe-smoking virago Mme. Pheip, her henpecked husband and their adopted daughter Petatje, the heroic strong man and chip shop owner Jan Spier and many more were added throughout the years. While the likes of Tuizenfloot, Van Zwam and Spier were primarily Nero's associates in adventure, Sleen employed the family characters to develop a potent aspect of the strip; a Flemish sitcom. At home, Nero the adventurer is a typical Belgian worker, who likes nothing more than to read his paper in peace and drink a few glasses of beer (in the colour albums his nose is permanently tinted a light red). Since 1962 every story arc has ended with a Flemish analogue to the village feast which concludes all **Asterix** stories; the "wafelenbak", in which all concerned gather in Nero's home to eat enormous stacks of Belgian waffles (while their host genially toasts them all and is ignored by them all!). In such ways **Nero** has mixed current affairs and comedy adventures with a celebration of character-istically Flemish home life, food and drink. In total, it has been a summation of Flemish thoughts, attitudes, preoccupations, manners… of life in general.

And so Sleen's decision to cancel it is front page news. **Nero** may have been unique among world comic strips: where the likes of Steve Bell's **If…** deals with British politics, and Chic Young's **Blondie** was the archetypal American domestic sitcom, **Nero** combined both angles, and more. It cannot be replaced, and its cancellation will leave far more of a hole in Belgian culture than most readers may be able to conceive of resulting from the demise of a comic. To rub a dreadful pun in one more time, Sleen's decision marks, in the most literal sense, the end of a **Nero**.

Sadly for Anglophone readers, only one of the 217 ***Nero*** *albums has been translated into English: the 1978 story* ***De kat van Katmandoe****, published as* ***The Cat of Catmandu*** *in 1983. (My thanks to Michel Kempeneers for his invaluable help with resources and discussion of* ***Nero****; and to Yves Kerremans and Pascal LeFèvre's* ***50 Jaar Nero****, a meticulously detailed and highly readable source of information published by Standaard Uitgeverij in 1997.)*



A photograph of Sleen at work, surrounded by a host of his comics creations. This picture was taken in 1994. (Marc Sleen was actually born Marc Neels)


Miffy
Terry Wiley & Adrian Kermode
CLUNK
HI MIFFY!
HIYA!
HEY, MIFF, THAT HALLOWEEN GHOST THING YOU GOT LOOKS PRETTY NEAT!
WHAT?
I DIDN'T BUY IT- I THOUGHT YOU BOUGHT IT!
SO WHERE DID IT COME FROM?!...
?
UM, EXCUSE ME, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU'VE SEEN MY HAIRY TOE ANYWHERE, HAVE YOU?
!
!

ISSUES

Carol Close confronts the right wing agenda at the heart of Vertigo's latest hit book.

BRIAN K. VAUGHN'S **Y: The Last Man**, a new "suggested for mature readers" title from Vertigo, has been getting a lot of positive press recently and I have to say the book's strong - not to mention rather appealing - premise (every male on earth dies bar one) hooked me into picking up the first four issues. Unfortunately, despite **Y** being well written and featuring at least a couple of genuinely engaging characters, I have no intention of shelling out for any further instalments. The reason? Simple. Its politics stink.

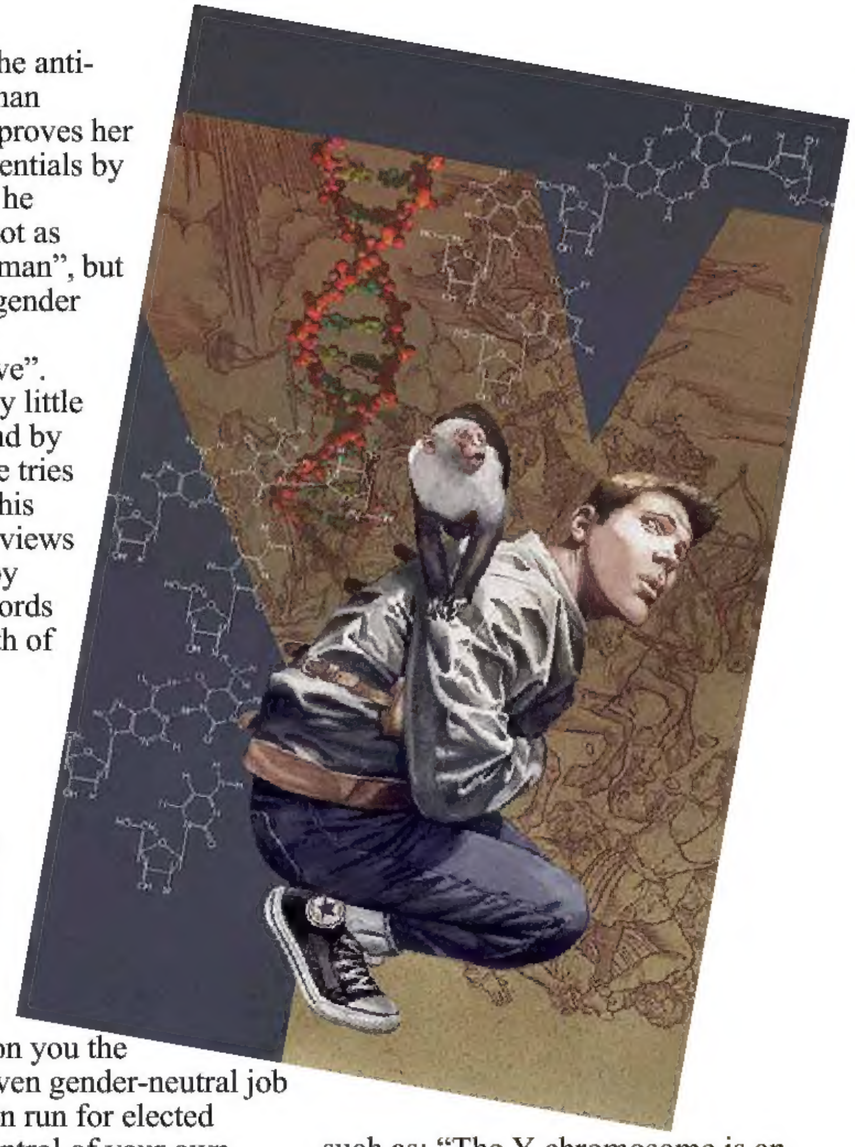
I suppose I should have seen the warning signs in issue #1, where Vaughn introduced us to a character called Alter Tse'elon. She's a colonel in the Israeli army and when we first see her on the streets of Nablus she's keen to point out that even though she's firing rubber bullets, they are only "warning shots" and "well above the Palestinians' heads." Vaughn obviously wants us to like Alter, clearly she's going to play a larger - and most likely heroic - role in the series' later stages. Unfortunately, whatever your take on the Israel/Palestine situation, the statistics regarding the behaviour of the Israeli army are pretty damning, and more often than not don't involve rubber bullets or warning shots "well above" heads. In a two minute search on the Internet I came across the website of LAW (*www.lawsociety.org*), a Palestinian human rights organisation based in Jerusalem. Founded in 1990, LAW aims to "defend Palestinian rights in accordance with international human rights law and United Nations declarations." One of the most interesting and disturbing areas of their site is the list they keep of every Palestinian killed since the beginning of the second Intifada on 29 September 2000. The page dedicated to killings between July 22 and September 1 2002 - the most recent entry - lists 68 fatalities, all bar four being directly attributed to the Israeli army. Of those, 19 of the victims were 16 years old or younger, a figure that includes two casualties who were four and another who was just two months old. Two more were men aged over 80.

And what of Nablus, "home" to the even-handed, warning shot firing Ms Tse'elon? The LAW website reports two "extra-judicial executions" carried out in the area at the beginning of August this year by, yes, you guessed it, the Israeli army. One, a 25-year-old man, was taken from his home at 2.30am on August 2, driven a short distance and then shot to death. Three days later Israeli forces surrounded the home of a 41-year-old political activist and shot him in the head. A second man present was also shot - this time in the chest and stomach. Eyewitnesses report that it took him 90 minutes to bleed to death and anyone trying to help him was dissuaded from so doing by the heavily armed soldiers. I'm guessing warning shots and rubber bullets didn't play a terribly big part in either of these incidents.

Now, don't get me wrong. Although I'm happy to declare my unwavering and heartfelt support for the Palestinian cause, I'm not for a moment suggesting that any opinion divergent from that should be routinely dismissed or vilified. However, in the same way I'd come down hard on any pro-Palestinian writer who failed to mention the terror and mayhem inflicted on the Israelis by suicide bombers, Vaughn's attempt to conceal the appalling behaviour of the Israeli army under Tse'elon's benevolent façade cannot be allowed to slide either.

Vaughn also seems to have a problem with certain strands of feminism

It isn't just the way Vaughn propagandises for Ariel Sharon and his fellow Zionists that undermines **Y: The Last Man**, though. Nope, Vaughn also seems to have a problem with certain strands of feminism. This is first revealed in issue #1, where two Democrats - one a female member of Congress, the other a male senator - get involved in a row over an abortion-related Bill amendment. Of course, the pro-abortion senator is a threatening, hypocritical bully, who sides with the Republicans when it comes to votes on gun control (boo, hiss), while the anti-abortion woman nevertheless proves her feminist credentials by insisting that he address her not as "congresswoman", but by the more gender neutral "representative". This is a nasty little sleight of hand by Vaughn, as he tries to legitimise his conservative views on abortion by putting *his* words into the mouth of a smart, reasonable Democrat woman. He seems to be saying "Let's be fair about this, girls, all those years of whining and protesting won you the right to be given gender-neutral job titles and even run for elected office, but control of your own bodies!? Are you crazy?"



Vaughn's misogyny is turned up a notch in issue #4 with the introduction of a radical feminist motorcycle gang-cum-political movement called The Amazons. Can you guess why they might call themselves The Amazons? Yes, that's right, because they're all so completely insane that they each burn off one of their own breasts - just like the "real" Amazons did way back when! And when these "roving packs of pissed off lesbians" aren't self-mutilating they like nothing more than spouting lazy man-hating drivel such as: "The Y chromosome is an aberration. You're nothing but a deformed female, a… a monster poisoned by your own hormones. Mother Earth eliminated your kind for a reason." I'm guessing Vaughn has never actually met a radical feminist in his life and would probably hide under a table in case she tried to castrate him if he did.

But do you want to know the real punch line here? This tripe was actually overseen and approved by Vertigo editor Heidi McDonald before the company gave her the boot earlier this year. Thanks a bunch, "sister".

WORLD OF HEROS

If you don't know what this column is about by now, you will never understand... Chris "SC" Spicer.

LOCKE MILLAR BOOK CROOK STOCK SHOCK

A NEW book giving advice on how to become a comics writer hit the shelves recently amidst a storm of controversy. The divisive volume, **How To Write Comics The Mark Millar Way**, is actually several hundred blank pages with Grant Morrison's telephone number printed on the last one.

The book is written by Sean Locke, columnist for the magazine *The Comics Periodical*, who told us: "One of the questions most commonly asked at comics conventions is 'how do I write comics.' I want this book to give a real insight into where one of the industry's most popular writers gets his inspiration from." Apparently, this is only the first volume in a series; the next book, **How To Write Comics The Neil Gaiman Way**, will feature exactly seven popular tales from world folklore, a selection of pages from Webster's Thesaurus Of Words Nobody Uses Any More, and an aid on how to make twenty issues-worth of plot stretch into a seventy issue series.

We talked to Millar, who told us he had no comment on the book, and wouldn't have one until he'd phoned Grant and asked him what to say.

WRITER CLOSES FORUM, BREATHES SIGH OF RELIEF

THOUSANDS of comics fans have been left without a place to express sycophantic fawning and receive casual abuse in return after the recent closure of the Walden Elvis Forum, an internet chat page run under the patronage of the popular writer. The forum, which had become a popular online haunt for gibbering fanboys and self-opinionated loners, was closed after Elvis decided he "couldn't stand to put up with the whiny losers for one second longer."

A WEF regular, popularly known by the nickname Birdie, told us: "The Walden Elvis Forum was like my home. I used to go there and spout half-baked opinions on subjects I didn't really know anything about, and people would actually listen to me! They cared! You might almost say that in the Walden Elvis Forum, I actually commanded someone's respect! Where am I ever going to find somewhere like that ever again?"

Another forum regular, writing under the online handle Poptart, said: "I loved Walden! I poured every ounce of my soul into relentlessly adoring each and every single one of his ideas, no matter how appalling it was. I loved Walden because you can tell that he really cares about his fans. Once, I told him that I hadn't been able to afford all twenty of the books he'd recommended I buy that week, and he replied saying I should be dragged out into the street by rabid dogs and fucked with broken glass so that I'd never be given the chance to taint the world with my disgusting offspring. You just don't get that level of commitment from other creators."

Elvis, however, is unrepentant about closing the forum: "I originally started the forum because, quite frankly, I needed to feel like a big man," he told us. "I wanted somewhere that I could lord it over lesser beings, where I could rant and rave and instantly and remorselessly abuse anyone who dared to disagree with me. And you know what? It worked. And for a while there, I got addicted to both the feeling of power and the obsequious flattery that poured in my direction. But recently I realised something - I don't need that forum. I don't need that bunch of losers to make me feel big. I am big. And who cares if they all decide to hate me - I've got a cushy job scripting computer games lined up."

We confronted Poptart with Elvis' statement. She said "See? You just can't beat that kind of unremitting, soul-crushing honesty. God bless you, Walden Elvis. God bless you."

MARVEL – NO GIMMICKS!

MARVEL has reacted angrily to claims that it uses too many gimmicks to sell its titles.

"A few years ago, the mere mention of the word Marvel was enough to make some fans vomit with horror", said Bill Jemas yesterday. "Now, we've managed to turn the company around and put out good, readable titles. We don't need gimmicks to sell comics, we can sell them on quality alone. In fact, we're so sure that we can sell comics with no gimmicks… that we're declaring next month No Gimmicks month! All our titles will ship with special No Gimmicks covers, which will have No Gimmicks on them, and the storylines across all the books will be linked by their special No Gimmicks content! What's the gimmick? There are No Gimmicks!"

Fans have reacted to the news with confusion. "Is this a gimmick or isn't it?" puzzled one fan we spoke to. "I mean, these covers which he says will have no gimmicks on them - does he mean that they'll have no gimmicks on them, or does he mean that they'll have "No Gimmicks" on them? This is making my head hurt worse than Lynn Varley's computer colouring."

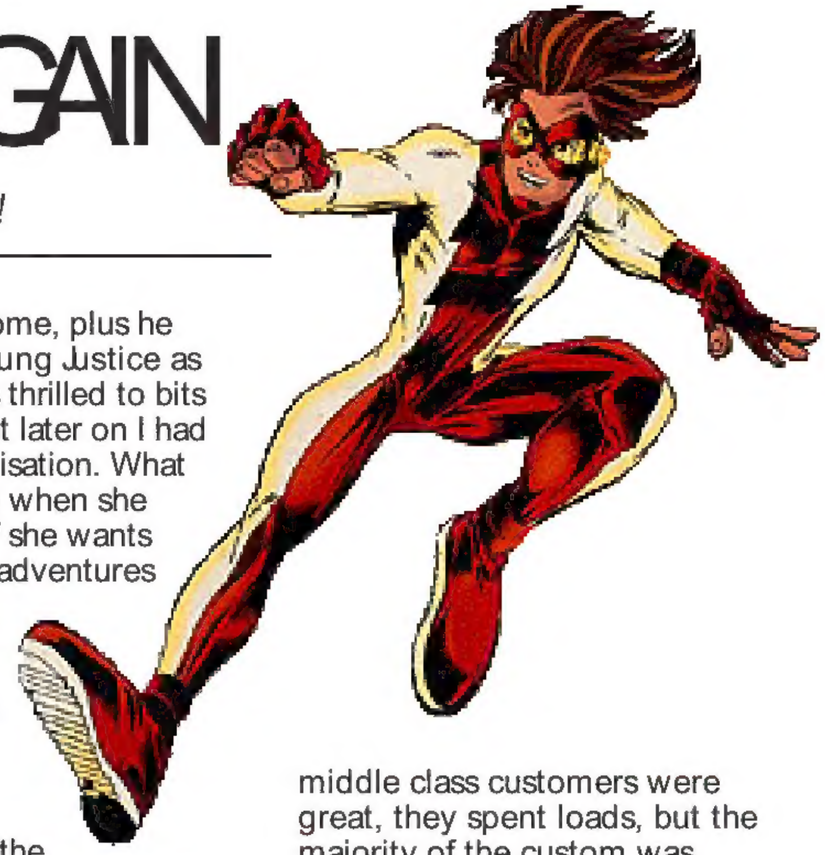
In other news, rumours that Marvel has been taken over by a hostile alien invasion fleet were denied yesterday by their new public relations officer, Sub-Commander Klaarg.

Marvel's subdued No Gimmicks logo, which will not appear on any of next month's titles.

Disclaimer: World of Heros is a spoof news column and the stories in it are intended purely for fun. So if you don't understand them or you take them seriously, you're either very fucking sad or my dad's bigger than your dad. Any similarity between this and anything else is purely intentional.

IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN, AGAIN

Yadda yadda yadda... Editors are always banging on about something no one gives a fig about... and you get it twice in one issue!



I TRY not to talk about my personal life here any more. It's not a hard and fast rule, but it is something that I'm fairly adamant about sticking with. You aren't interested in me. It isn't because of me that you download (or now buy) this magazine. You especially don't want to see pictures of me kissing babies. You don't want me to talk about me in such a way that it might make you feel uncomfortable.

Today I'm going to make an exception.

Why?

Because this is about comics. And I believe it's important...

My life has changed considerably since my days as Features Editor and #2 at Comics International. There have been times when I regretted not being there anymore (a regular pay check and good colleagues does that) and times when I wish everything could be OK again (especially with Dez and me). But if I hadn't parted company with Comics International I wouldn't have had a massive life-changing experience – one so incredible that I feel like a different person as a result.

I started working with the homeless. Helping them find a roof over their heads. Working in a temporary hostel for teenagers who have nothing - except me, my colleagues and the few truly charitable people in the area.

I used to be bigoted and even a bit racist. Teenage scumbags were the nightmare all self-effacing middle class people had, especially when moving through the less salubrious areas of my town.

Then I worked with them.

Guess what?

They're no different from you or me. They have the same fears, the same hopes. The dreams and the nightmares.

Last week I dealt with my first attempted suicide. I spent four hours sitting on a floor with a 16 year-old girl, who *so desperately* wanted to end her life she was sawing at her wrists with her keys.

Today, calling into work on my day off (yeah, how often do we do *that*), she rushed up to me, hugged me, said "Hi" and went off on her merry way. I'd done a good job. I felt so damned good it was unbelievable.

Try helping people.

You change.

So, what's this have to do with comics? Well... I'm going to name drop, so I apologise in advance. I was out drinking with Jamie (Hellblazer) Delano the other week and I was telling him about this completely satisfying but unbelievably stressful job I do and how I'd turned a couple of the kids onto comics. I get comp copies from Image and the ones that don't get sent to reviewers or aren't used for art or whatever are given to the centre where I work.

Jamie says, "I've got seven boxes of the things under the stairs. My partner wants shot of them and I've read the ones I wanted to. Do you want to donate them to the centre?"

Of course I did!

Three days later, I'm sitting on my living room floor taking out the Mature Reader titles (because we're talking about damaged kids here and I wouldn't feel happy letting them see "impressionable" comics). The following day the first of the boxes was dropped at the accomodation centre.

The next day, when I went on shift, the centre was buzzing. A 16-year-old girl called Kim rushed up to me and said "I think Impulse is cool! Can you get any more?" I said that I had at least 6 more issues of Impulse at home, plus he appears in Young Justice as well. She was thrilled to bits about this. But later on I had a horrible realisation. What would she do when she realises that if she wants to follow the adventures of Bart Allen, it's going to cost her two of our English pounds per issue? And what if she wants to buy the back issues? Most stores have them at about a quid each (that's one English pound). She's homeless with no job!

Suddenly there's no entry point for new comics readers.

Sociologically speaking, many people who are going to enjoy reading comics are those who will not have the financial resources to be able to afford other things. In today's world the underclasses are the people who are going to need escapism and fantasy wish fulfilment the most. The problem is that in countries like the USA and in the UK, comics are price targeted at the middle classes - the people with disposable incomes who, very often, actually don't want to read comics.

When I was a retailer my customers were not, on the whole, middle class. Hey, the middle class customers were great, they spent loads, but the majority of the custom was from those who probably couldn't really afford it.

Comics are now a big part in the lives of at least 12 teenagers out of a centre that holds 20. In demographic terms, from 20 people comics publishers would hope to keep one, maybe two, as regular readers. But if comics were affordable to the people who truly would appreciate them and come back regularly for more, the major publishers could expect 12 out of every 20 to stay. The maths is simple. 12 readers at $1.00 a time = $12.00. 1 reader at $2.99 a time = $2.99. There are more reasons than this, but this is *the* fundamental one. And it annoys me!

Isn't it time that the comics industry got its house in order and guaranteed its future?

VMCA Helping young people build a future